On theLatest Video Summits Held between the EU and PRC

Sino-European relations remain one of the chief components in the world’s rapidly changing political puzzle. On top of that, this component itself often undergoes transformations, and NEO keeps track of this process on a more or less constant basis. The last time we addressed this topic was because of a series of events that occurred at the beginning of the summer this year, with the most notable being the summit where both Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China Li Keqiang and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (the informal leader of the EU) took part; this was held on June 11th in a video conference format.

Ten days later, the 22nd PRC-EU (video) summit took place, where China was represented by President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. The EU was represented by Charles Michel, the President of the European Council (the highest body in the European Union), who replaced Donald Tusk in December 2019, and the President of the European Commission (EU government) Ursula von der Leyen, who replaced Jean-Claude Juncker (also in December 2019), and Josep Borrell, who is responsible for EU foreign policy.

Even the headline for the press release jumps out, which appeared on the EU website at the end of this event: “Defending EU interests and values in a complex and vital partnership”. That phrase above states defending the chief, contradictory elements in that same “complex” relationship between Europe and China.

On one hand, the factor involving the growing problems in relations with their traditional ally (the United States) is prompting the Europeans to foster cooperation with the world’s second power, which does not dictate any preliminary political conditions for them (unlike the former). At the same time, fears (and not unfounded ones) of losing key industries (if this cooperation with a rapidly developing economic giant does not have any restrictions) are forcing the Europeans to engage in “protecting themselves”. And this particularly concerns technologically advanced industrial clusters.

In addition, Europeans (like Americans) are at the mercy of “advanced” social and cultural trends that run directly counter to not only the Communist ideology espoused by modern China, but also its millennia-old historical traditions. Admittedly, this applies to humanity as a whole. For this reason, the press release mentions the problem of “protecting” values that are allegedly ignored by Beijing in the Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong.

The speeches to journalists from both top EU officials at the end of this summit were made in approximately this same, contradictory vein. Along with reaffirming their readiness to develop cooperation with China in various fields, continuing the negotiation process to reduce barriers to economic cooperation and mutual investment, long-standing allegations were conveyed to the Chinese side about “unfair competition” (for example, in the area of trade in steel products).

As far as the range of problems involved in the coronavirus pandemic is concerned, while not as explicit as the statement given by the European Commission on June 10th, during this summit reprimands were still addressed to China similar to those from US leadership on that same occasion. If not in terms of the form it was presented, then in terms of its content. Even though a desire was expressed to cooperate with China to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

It would seem that the whole array of problems present in bilateral relations was only just discussed (meaning on June 22nd) yet again at the highest levels. That is why the question arises about why, three months afterwards (on September 14th), something similar to that needed to be arranged.
The answer to it, apparently, lies in the symbolism that is so preponderant in international affairs today. The thing is that 2020 marked 45 years from the time that relations were established between the PRC and EU. However, at that time the letter “E” was present in the abbreviation designating the union of European states, indicating its initially economic character.

This is a good rationale to do some kind of interim audit of everything that has been done in bilateral relations since that time, and to outline ways to resolve problems. At the end of last year, Germany put forth an initiative to hold (“in the summer 2020 in Leipzig”) a bilateral summit marking this occasion, in which Europe would be represented not only by senior EU officials, but also by the leaders of all 27 member states that belong to the European Union.

But SARS-COV-2 subsequently erupted, in some strange way coinciding with the sharp downturn in the situation worldwide. The event was postponed until autumn, with the initial assumption that it would be held in the format that had been planned. However, contrary to all hopes, the international situation did not improve in terms of either its “healthcare” or “political” components. Therefore, on September 14th, in terms of the format what we saw was a combination of the two previous summits. This meant that German Chancellor Angela Merkel joined the ranks of the EU’s leadership, which, apparently, was supposed to symbolize some kind of participation in the event on the part of the EU’s member states as well.

Of course, there has been nothing novel in the positions taken by all the parties over the past three months. Arguably, the only thing that observers paid attention to stemmed from the Europeans’ fairly clearly delineated unwillingness to participate in the escalating confrontation between the two leading world powers. The words of Charles Michel that “Europe is a player, not a playing field” should attest to this.

On the whole, it could be stated that past Sino-European summits have demonstrated an absence of any noticeable progress in any direction with bilateral relations. And this, generally speaking, already says a lot against the backdrop of an increasingly dangerous deterioration of US-Chinese relations.

If it were not for one recent, seemingly strange event associated with the visit to Taiwan made by the presiding officer of the Czech Senate, which, in the context of the topic under discussion, raises a number of important issues. Was this poke right in the most painful spot of China’s foreign policy problems inflicted solely on this visitor’s personal initiative? Or was this “mindless zeal” seen by one of the many new members of the “civilized Western world” that has appeared since the end of the Cold War? If the latter is true, then what part of this “world” was behind this obvious provocation: the American or European one?

In regard to all these issues, it seems appropriate to briefly touch upon the topic (and one which has been discussed for a long time in the expert community) of the EU’s identity - both in the space outside the European continent and within it. There are quite a few questions hardwired in this topic (without any definitive answers), and some of them roughly go like this: “And what, in fact, is the European Union?” “What should be the reaction to all the documents originating from Brussels, and is it worth even reacting to them at all?”

These kinds of questions are extremely pressing not only for China, but other major players, including the Russian Federation and the US. This is because it is not clear how to respond to the situation caused by the need to develop mutually beneficial relations with leading European countries, which are forced to take into account those documents, and the opinion of officials entrenched in Brussels. They appear in the “capital of Europe” pursuant to procedures that have nothing even remotely to do with the “democratic” expression of Europeans’ will.

Or (and what is in fact true) are those Brussels “documents and officials” nothing more than convenient, transitional instruments in the political trade going on between those same European countries and China, Russia, and the United States?

No matter what, this author highly doubts the validity of the popular assertions about “the continuing American occupation of (unfortunate) Europe”, and about “the EU as an instrument of American policy in Europe”. The factor of Europeans’ total economic potential that has been accumulated in the post-war period should not be underestimated, or the level of their shrewdness, which has been honed on their continent over the centuries. Moreover, the first factor essentially stems from the second one, since Europe successfully assigned the problem of “containing Communism” to its “occupier”. Incidentally, that same trick (and with the same “occupier”) was done by post-war Japan no less successfully.

That is why in 2016 the American “electorate” responded well to the broad message given by a candidate for the presidential seat whom nobody knew about before, Donald Trump: “Guys! We have been cheated in a very
The acceleration of the (long-observed) growth of problems in transatlantic relations that can be traced back to this has since been substantiated by a number of recent events. First, we should note Germany’s refusal to follow suit after Great Britain made the decision (adopted under US pressure) to completely ban operations for the Chinese IT giant Huawei inside the country. The Global Times presented this to other European countries as a “an example to follow”. Incidentally, in the second quarter this year Germany, for the first time, came out on top in terms of worldwide export volume to China, displacing the United States.

Something that was considered no less significant in the PRC was the “preliminary order” sent to the leading American social media giant Facebook by the EU’s regulatory authority for private businesses, based in Ireland. The essence of the claims put forward was that Facebook’s use of subscribers’ personal data “for certain purposes” was not acceptable.

It’s worth noting that the “robbery” (as per the term that is widespread in the PRC) that was carried out on the Chinese company TikTok by US leadership, and accompanied by similar wording. This action taken by the EU in relation to Facebook was assessed by that same Global Times as “a boomerang effect”. Incidentally, in the United States itself dissatisfaction is increasing with politically motivated administrative interference in the affairs of private businesses.

So there is an immense complexity in the strategic configuration of “USA-China-EU”. And perhaps that is the only thing that can be stated with some level of confidence at the end of the next Sino-European summits.

*Vladimir Terekhov, an expert on issues in the Asia-Pacific region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*