

This is the Way the West Ends

Description

by [ADRIEL KASONTA](#) via

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Image: YouTube Screengrab / Getty

Ukraine's humiliation and Gaza's shame accelerating estrangement of West and the rest at a crucial turning point in global power relations

With the United States entangled in conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza and the threat of a war with China looming large, Professor Michael Brenner's insights and views on the state of the US-led liberal order are arguably as timely and important as ever.

[Brenner](#), a respected luminary on transatlantic relations and international security, is Professor Emeritus of International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

He has also served at the Foreign Service Institute, the US Department of Defense and Westinghouse. In a wide-ranging and no-holds-barred interview with Asia Times' contributor Adriel Kasonta, Brenner lays out how the US and collective West lost their moral authority and way.

Adriel Kasonta: Despite what we hear from the Western political class and the compliant stenographers from the mainstream media, the world doesn't seem to look as they want us to believe. The hard reality on the ground, known to anyone who lives anywhere but Europe or the US, is that the collective West is experiencing an accelerated decline in political and economic domains, with significant moral ramifications. Could you please tell our readers what is the root cause of this state of affairs and what is the rationale behind continuing this collective suicide?

Michael Brenner: I suggest that we formulate the issue by asking what is the causal direction between the moral decline and the collective West's political and economic decline? On Ukraine, it has been a fundamental geostrategic error that has had negative moral consequences: the cynical sacrifice of half a million Ukrainians used as cannon fodder and physical destruction of the country, in the cause of weakening and marginalizing Russia.

The stunning feature of the Palestine affair is the readiness of immoral government elites – indeed the near entirety of the political class – to give their implicit blessing to the atrocities and war crimes Israel has committed over the past five months, which is having profound repercussions on the West's standing and influence globally.

At one moment, they speak proudly about the superiority of Western values while condemning the practices of other countries; at another, they lean over backwards to justify far greater humanitarian abuses, to provide the perpetrator with the arms to destroy to kill and to maim innocent civilians, and in the case of the United States, to extend diplomatic cover in the United Nations Security Council.

In the process, they are dissipating their standing in the eyes of the world outside the West, representing two-thirds of humanity. The latter's historical dealings with the countries of the West, including the relatively recent past, left a residue of skepticism about American-led claims to being the world's ethical standard setters. That sentiment has given way to outright disgust in the face of this blatant display of hypocrisy. Moreover, it exposes the harsh truth that racist attitudes never had been fully extinguished – after a period of dormancy, its recrudescence is manifest.

As far as the United States is concerned, the reference points for this judgment are not the mythic image of "the city on the Hill"; the last, best hope of mankind; the indispensable nation for achieving

global peace and stability: the Providential people born in a state of Original Virtue destined to lead the world down the path of Enlightenment. None of those idealistic standards. No, it has debased itself when measured against the prosaic standards of human decency, of responsible statecraft, of a decent respect for the opinions of humankind.

Moreover, the ensuing estrangement between the West and the rest is occurring at a turning point in international power relationships. It is a time when the tectonic plates of the political world are shifting, when the old constellations of power and of influence are being successfully challenged, when America has responded to feelings of self-doubt as the ordained global guide and overseer by compulsive, futile displays of muscle flexing.

Anxiety and self-doubt masked by false bravado is the hallmark sentiment among America's political elites. That is a poor starting point for a re-engagement with reality. Americans are too attached to their exalted self-image, too narcissistic – collectively and individually, too lacking in self-awareness, too leaderless to make that wrenching adaptation. Those appraisals apply to Western Europe as to the United States. Leaving a diminished, aggrieved but unrepentant trans-Atlantic community.



“West’s Reckoning?”, you mentioned that the situation in Ukraine and the tragedy in Gaza shames it. Can you expand on this a bit more?

Photo: Courtesy of Michale Brenner

MB: Defeat in Ukraine entails much more than the military collapse of the Ukrainian forces that is in the cards. For the United States has led its allies into what amounts to a campaign to permanently diminish Russia, to neutralize it as a political or economic presence in Europe, to eliminate a major obstacle to consolidating American global hegemony.

The West has thrown everything they have into that campaign: their stock of modern weapons, a corps of advisers, tens of billions of dollars, a draconian set of economic sanctions designed to bring the Russian economy to its knees and a relentless project aimed at isolating Russia and undermining Putin’s position.

It has failed ignominiously on every count. Russia is considerably stronger on every dimension than it was before the war; its economy is more robust than any Western economy; it has proven to be

militarily superior; and it has won the sympathies of nearly the entire world outside the collective West.

The assumption that the West remains custodial of global affairs has proven a fantasy. Such comprehensive failure has meant a decline in the United States' ability to shape world affairs on matters economic and security. The Sino-Russian partnership is now ensconced as a rival equal to the West in every respect.

That outcome derives from hubris, dogmatism and a flight from reality. Now, the West's self-respect and image is being scarred by its role in the Palestine catastrophe. So, now it faces the double challenge of restoring its sense of prowess while at the same time regaining its moral bearings.

AK: Is it accurate to say that Ukraine and Gaza are connected in the sense that both indicate a failing liberal international order that is attempting to prevent itself from collapsing and causing turmoil as it descends into oblivion? If so, what are some potential outcomes for the future?

MB: Let's bear in mind that the liberal international order serves Western interests above all. Its workings were biased in our favor. That's one. The regularity and stability that it produced, for which the IMF, World Bank, etc were the institutional cynosure, ensured for decades that it would go unchallenged. That is two.

The rise of new power centers – China, above all, and the wider centripetal forces redistributing assets more generally – has left the United States and its European dependents with two choices. Accommodate themselves to this new situation by: a) hammering out terms of engagement that accorded a larger place for the newcomers; b) resetting the rules of the game so as to remove the current bias; c) adjusting the structure and procedures of international institutions in a manner reflecting the end of Western dominance; and d) rediscovering genuine diplomacy.

Nowhere in the West has that option been seriously considered. So, after a period of ambivalence and muddling, all signed onto an American project to prevent the emergence of challengers, to undermine them and to double down on assertive policies to yield nothing, to compromise nothing. We remain locked on that course despite serial failures, humiliations and the impetus given the BRICS project.

AK: According to some Western politicians and policymakers, other global powers are often treated as passive actors without agency or power to shape the world according to their national interests. This Manichean worldview is marked by a distinction between the "rules-based order" and international law or "democracy vs authoritarianism." Is there an alternative to this thinking and what are the chances of change occurring before it's too late?

MB: See above response. There are no signs that Western leaders are prepared intellectually, emotionally or politically to make the necessary adjustments. Necessity is not always the mother of invention. Instead, we see stubborn dogmatism, avoidance behavior and a deeper plunge into a world of fantasies.

The American reaction to manifestations of declining prowess is denial along with compulsion to reassure itself that it still has the "right stuff" through increasingly audacious acts. We are seeing where that has led in Ukraine. Far more dangerous is the reckless dispatch of troops to Taiwan.

As for Europe, it is evident that its political elites have been denatured by 75 years of near-total

dependence on America. A complete absence of independent thinking and willpower is the outcome. In more concrete ways, Europe's vassalage to the United States obliges it to follow Washington down whatever policy road the seigneur takes – however reckless, dangerous, unethical and counterproductive.

In predictable fashion, they have walked (or run) like lemmings over whatever cliff the United States chooses next under its own suicidal impulses. So it's been in Iraq, in Syria, in Afghanistan, in regard to Iran, in Ukraine, on Taiwan and on all matters involving Israel. The string of painful failures and heavy costs produces no change in loyalty or mindset.



A printed photograph of a US Army soldier in a chair among the trailer trucks, and electronics which sold for the price of iron at a bazaar outside airfield in the Bagram district north of Kabul, Afghanistan, on May 19, 2021. Photo: Asia Times Files / AFP via Anadolu Agency / Haroon Sabawoon

It cannot – for the Europeans have absorbed totally the habit of deference, the Americans' worldview, their skewed interpretation of outcomes and their shamefully fictitious narratives. The Europeans no more can throw this addiction than a life-long alcoholic can go cold turkey.

AK: There has been a lot of discussion about the negative impact of neoconservatism on US foreign policy and the world. In essence, neoconservatism seeks the role of the US to dominate not only the Western Hemisphere (as per the Monroe Doctrine) but the entire world, as per the Wolfowitz Doctrine.

Although some US think tanks are now advocating for an end to the “never-ending wars” in the Middle East and for Europe to continue the US-provoked [proxy war](#) with Russia, it seems that the neoconservative ideology has taken on a [new guise](#) of “progressivism” and “realism”, and now aims to focus solely on China, even to the point of replicating the Ukraine scenario in Taiwan. How accurate is this assessment?

MB: The entire foreign policy community in the United States now shares the basic tenets of neoconservatives. Actually, the scripture is Paul Wolfowitz’s notorious memorandum of March 1991 wherein he laid out a comprehensive, detailed strategy for systematizing American global dominance. Everything that Washington is doing, and thinking, now is derivative of that plan.

Its core principles: the United States should use all the means at its disposal to establish American global dominance; to that end, it must be ready to act preventively to stymie the emergence of any power that could challenge our hegemony; and to maintain full spectrum dominance in every region of the globe. Ideals and values are relegated to an auxiliary role as a veneer on the application of power and as a stick with which to beat others. Classic diplomacy is disparaged as inappropriate to this scheme of things.

For Biden himself, a confident, assertive, hard-edged approach to dealing with others derives naturally from belief in Americanism as a Unified Field Theory that explains, interprets and justifies whatever the US thinks and does. Were Biden reelected, this outlook will remain unchanged. And were he to be replaced by Kamala Harris mid-term, which is likely, inertia will keep everything on the fixed course.

AK: Do you think the United States is destined to remain a global empire, constantly in conflict with anyone it perceives as a potential threat to its world dominance? Or is it possible for the country to become a republic that collaborates constructively with other global players to achieve greater benefits for its citizens and the broader international community? As the saying goes, “Those who live by the sword, die by the sword,” right?

MB: I’m a pessimist. For there are no signs that either our rulers, elites or public are susceptible to coming to terms with the state of affairs depicted above. The open question is whether this pretense will simply persist as a gradual weakening of global influence and domestic well-being unfolds, or, rather, will end in disaster.

Europeans and allies elsewhere should not accept to be sideline observers nor, even worse, become co-inhabitants of this world of fantasy as they have in Ukraine, on Palestine and in demonizing China.

Michael Brenner is the author of numerous books and over 80 articles and published papers. His most recent works include “Democracy Promotion and Islam”; “Fear and Dread In The Middle East”; “Toward A More Independent Europe”; “Narcissistic Public Personalities & Our Times.”

His writings include books with Cambridge University Press (“Nuclear Power and Non Proliferation”), the Center For International Affairs at Harvard University (“The Politics of International Monetary Reform”), and the Brookings Institution (“Reconcilable Differences, US-French Relations In The New Era”). He is reachable at mbren@pitt.edu