

A Chagall exhibition in Frankfurt prompted our author to reflect on the increasing violence in international relations. Liberal democracies have the power to turn the tide, but how?

"Chagall. World in Turmoil" was an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Schirn Frankfurt that broke visitor records. It showcased Marc Chagall's works from the 1930s and 40s, a period when his colorful palette increasingly darkened. The exhibition closed almost exactly one year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

That date seemed to be the ultimate turning point, making terms like "civilizational break" and "Zeitenwende" topics of everyday discourse. Yet, the turmoil continues: October 7, 2023, represents a new level of systematic genocidal terror by Hamas against Israel. We had just provided shelter to Ukrainian refugee families, and now we are witnessing the fear of Jews in our streets and schools. We also see that Islamists and their sympathizers do not have to be afraid, not even when they chant for Israel's destruction.

What manifests globally as "turmoil"? To answer this, we must think about humans and violence, the decay of the international system, and the threat to our liberal democracies. Let me say it right at the outset: liberal democracies can turn the tide.

Violence and AI – An Anthropological View

Let's begin with an anthropological perspective. It can feel like we are repeating Chagall's experience of violence's total unboundedness. We question the future of humanity. Salman Rushdie, in his peace prize speech, referenced Homer: "Homer tells us that peace comes only after decades of war, when Troy is destroyed and those we cared about are long dead."

In the Iliad, we hear a dialogue between Menelaus, momentarily humane, and Agamemnon, who advocates total annihilation: "The Trojans must be wiped out, unburied, traceless, even the boy in his mother's womb, all obliterated from Ilios." And we hear the same annihilation obsession today – not only with the Hamas attack, but when we hear a Russian TV commentator stated that Russia must pursue total destruction, lest Ukrainians' children seek revenge. Remember, we're in 2023 AD.

Two and a half millennia after Homer, in 2005, French philosopher André Glucksmann was quoted on the nature of evil: "Hatred is a fundamental human reality, self-nourishing, needing no reason. For believers, it's original sin; for psychoanalysts, the eruption of the death urge – Eros and Thanatos, love and death."

The Danger of Darkness and How the West Can Overcome It

We're witnessing growing apocalyptic "fears" in this century's third decade. Are they not natural, given this anthropological backdrop? AI inventors warn of its potential as a weapon of mass destruction; Oppenheimer's efforts to limit nuclear proliferation were in vain; and climate change poses an unprecedented challenge to humanity's collective self-organization. Upheaval and furor will thus continue, the fear of apocalypse won't abate.

World Order's Dissolution

The sense of humanity threatened by humans is compounded by the dissolution of a global order. Or what we liked to think of as global order. From the League of Nations to the United Nations and economic governance institutions like the WTO, there was a widespread sense that those for a of international understanding provided an umbrella of reliability. Germany, especially post-war and post-reunification, greatly benefited from having been able to pursue relatively unbothered a successful global business model.

What was underestimated was that the system could not survive without the stabilizing force of a hegemon. The US hasn't got everything right, but it played a mostly effective role for decades. In the Middle East, the US pursued frequent diplomatic initiatives to address the Palestinian issue, at times with success. However, 9/11, growing independence from Middle East oil, China's rise, and reluctance to bear global policing costs led to disastrous wars and to similarly disastrous US withdrawal decisions.

The consequences are widely visible today: the 2003 invasion of Iraq paved the way to Iran becoming dominant in the region. And like no other foreign policy decision of the US, it put an axe to the very foundations of the international order. Finally, the West's indecisiveness in 2008 emboldened Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and Georgia, instead of offering these West-aspiring nations protection.

Statistics speak volumes: As the Peace Research Institute Oslo's recent study reveals, "The number, intensity, and length of conflicts worldwide is at its highest since the Cold War. In 2022, there were 55 active conflicts, lasting 8-11 years on average, up from 33 conflicts lasting 7 years a decade earlier."

Demographics amplify tendencies for perpetual conflict. The Mujahideen ousted the Soviet Union from Afghanistan not just with US weapons but also by continuously mobilizing new generations of fighters. In Gaza, the Palestinian population has increased by several hundred thousand since Israel's disengagement in 2005.

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Wars and demographics increase pressure on the West, particularly Europe, exactly in its most vulnerable area: migration. Absolutely no one in the Arab world wants to accommodate even a fraction of the over two million Palestinians from Gaza. We know what this means for Europe. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan added fuel to the fire, and while Biden's handling of multiple crises since Ukraine's invasion is commendable, there are no signs of a more fundamental reversal of America's drift towards disengagement.

When the US Congress debates military aid for Ukraine and Israel, a major intersection between two groups emerges. "Restrainers" want to limit military spending abroad as a matter of principle. "Prioritizers" want to concentrate military resources at where the true challenges are. Both camps will likely want to reduce aid for Ukraine: the "prioritizers" are looking to Taiwan and are supported in this by one of the last remaining consensus positions in US politics – that China is America's main adversary. So, in the case of America, it is withdrawal that creates turmoil. In the case of China, it is the country's rise that has roiled the world order.

Globalization and Systemic Rivalry

For a long time, the world seemed mostly without turmoil - except for China's integration into the world economy, sparking one of the most spectacular periods of growth mankind has ever seen. Bill Clinton, in a 2001 speech at Harvard University, enthusiastically declared China's WTO entry a US national interest – a "one way street" favoring US exports. "It will make you rich and China democratic" was the promise of globalization made by US politicians to the American people – from Clinton to Obama's first term.

We all know how that story ended. The fury ignited by Trump against globalization and against China also used the image of the one-way street, but in the opposite direction, against American interests, and especially at the expense of the American middle class. In this interpretation, not only of the Trump but also of the Biden administration, the open trade policy has been unilaterally to the detriment of the USA, and it has conversely catapulted China into the role of America's systemic rival. "Systemic rival" may sound somewhat technical, but in truth, it is the description of the major conflict of the international system in the 21st century.

The Thucydides Trap

We began with Homer and we continue with Thucydides. Graham Allison's "The Thucydides Trap" is a popular political science book in the US, historically referencing the conflict between dominant Sparta and rising Athens. It raises the core question: is a US-China conflict so inevitable that it must end in military escalation?

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Xi Jinping himself has taken up this terminology and declared in 2015 that there is no inevitability in the conflict dynamics leading to military escalation. The question is, what does this mean? Because Xi's vision of "national rejuvenation" has an extremely expansive impact, both economically and militarily. Since 2012, its declared goal is not only to achieve China's independence from the West but also, conversely, to make the West economically dependent on China. To this end, it will comprehensively leverage its already-achieved status as the dominant trading partner for the West.

Chinese Pressure Campaign

There is also no ambiguity about Chinese military goals: China has been arming for decades to oust the US from the Pacific and reclaim Taiwan. China expects submission from its neighbors. Too few know the reaction of the then Chinese Foreign Minister to a protest by the Philippines against the violations of Philippine territorial waters: "Let's see this: China is a big country; the Philippines are a small country."

The provisional climax of Chinese harassment against Taiwan was marked on September 17, 2023, with no fewer than 104 overflights by Chinese military aircraft and 40 violations of Taiwanese territorial waters in just one day! Apart from this ongoing drama, the turmoil in the region is unfolding insidiously. From 2013 to 2022, India and Australia increased their military spending by 47 percent each, South Korea by 37 percent, and China by 63 percent.

And here too, as in Eastern Europe, we should have listened earlier to the neighbors who have been subjected to the imperial impositions of both Russia and China for over a decade. Why did pacifist Japan and notoriously alliance-averse India form the "Quad" – the "quadrilateral security dialogue" – with Australia and the US in 2007 already?

Challenging the West

The global front now extends beyond Southeast Asia. George W. Bush in 2002 coined the phrase "Axis of Evil" – accusing Iran, Iraq, and North Korea of supporting global terrorism. Today, we have to say, there indeed is this "Axis of Evil." These days, Russia is a member, while China engages exactly as far as "plausible deniability" allows it to.

Thus, we are witnessing a new global alignment. The old industrial nations of the G7 find themselves facing a global state formation orchestrated by China under the term "BRICS," which has one crucial unifying element: the fight against the dominance of the USA. Its hard core consists of Iran, Russia, and China, with North Korea as an appendage. Given their fundamentally revisionist claim, the comparison with the Axis powers of the 1930s is not entirely inadmissible.

While Iran and Russia deploy the most brutal conventional military means, China- has become a major power in cyber warfare. This is not only directed at the physical infrastructure of the West. Rather, China is extensively engaged in establishing its own narratives as dominant, undermining facts, and spreading disinformation.

Disinformation

The strategy behind influencing Western discourses is based on the "force of politics" rather than the "politics of force." The impact of this form of subversive media strategy can be observed in the influence on elections in Taiwan, the USA, Canada, and Brexit, as practiced by Russia as well. After the UN votes on Ukraine in 2022, many Western observers concluded that the rule-based world order was not yet at an end. They overlooked, however, that, with about 60 percent of the world's population represented in the UN, the majority did not side with the West. This majority is now brutally reflected in the result of the Israel resolution of October 28, 2023, in which Hamas is not even mentioned.

Strategically, the states of this axis—China, North Korea, Russia, and Iran—are not driven by identical interests. However, they are comparable in their degree of internal repression, the pursuit of imperial ideologies externally, and in the identity-forming opposition to the West, the USA, and in the case of Iran, against Israel, to which Putin has now joined.

Unlike the European countries with the EU and the USA in NATO, these axis states do not have genuine alliance partners. But they can use their opposition against the so-called West to their advantage in many parts of the world. The culmination point is now the global reaction to Israel defending itself against the genocidal attack of Hamas. Israel today is the ideal foil for global anti-colonial ideology and has been the target of over 100 UN resolutions. Meanwhile, only ten have been directed against Iran and not a single one against China.

For several decades, Israel has been successful with a capitalist-oriented economic system and has been defending its state-building (tragically also with settlement construction in the West Bank) since 1948 against an Arab neighborhood, which in turn preserves and instrumentalizes the victim status of the Palestinians against Israel.

Postcolonial Theory and Imperialist Narratives

In today's so-called postcolonial theory, which is heavily propagated at Western universities, it is assumed that the old colonial dependencies have not changed. In its most extreme version, postcolonial theory posits that the world consists of white, Western perpetrators and non-white,

non-Western victims, as succinctly described by, for example, Islamic studies scholar Susanne Schröter. Thus, the ideology of victimhood exists far beyond the Islamic world – and this allows Israel to be targeted with full global force, as the supposedly worst capitalist imperialist. Yet some of the states exploiting this global front are themselves, like China and Russia, driven by imperial narratives.

Take Turkey, which geopolitically dreams of controlling the so-called Mavi Vatan, the blue homeland surrounded by adjacent seas of the Ottoman Turkey. Such narratives form a crucial component in the unfolding of expansive claims. They foster identity, and by no means is it repression alone that keeps the regimes in China, Russia, and Iran alive today; identity plays an essential role. Joe Biden has declared the fight of democracy against autocracy. This can also be expressed differently: Today, the principles of identity and plurality are at war with each other.

In India, the founding consensus of a democracy that grants equal rights to Hindus and Muslims has been crumbling for years. In China, everyone from homosexuals to minorities that do not fit into the image of a homogeneous majority society is persecuted. Chauvinism, with its two components of misogyny and nationalism, is particularly resonant in the West.

A Lack of Fighting Spirit?

German sociologist Aleida Assmann in her excellent book "The Re-Invention of the Nation" precisely discusses this in terms of "Thymos." And this is how again we arrive back at the Greeks. "Thymos" refers to something like fighting spirit – a term preoccupying political philosophy from Solterdjik to Fukuyama for several years now.

The question here is: is there a secular but humane source of strength that provides meaning? Peter Sloterdijk laments the "Quasi-Matriarchy," and AfD philosopher Jongen speaks of the "emasculatation of our society" as an underprovision of "Thymos." They advocate for renationalization and a rehabilitation of national pride and honor as a fix for this deficiency.

Putin, Xi, Erdogan, Bolsonaro, Orban, Trump, Modi – it is no coincidence that all are not only nationalists but also promote masculinity as a key element of their political charisma. And it is no coincidence that they resonate with Western nationalists and AfD philosophers who see the iron principle of Thymos at work. The rift between the Western pluralist humanist model and its global opponents runs through the very core of our societies.

What to Do?

Liberal democracies can turn the tide, as I said at the start. But how?

1. Our fate remains dependent on the USA. Accepting this, while fearing Trump is not a sustainable policy approach. Germany's inability to even establish a Federal Security Council shows a glaring lack of geopolitical willpower. Europe needs, in alliance with the US, security credibility and capability. The most immediate contribution to burden sharing by Europeans is not the 2% target. It is the successful defense of Ukraine and a military defeat of Russia.

2. Reinterpreting history and the present turns reality into the prey of our adversaries. The West must reclaim dominance of the narrative and redefine our Western identity. This task is vast and spans everything from regulating social media to securing societal and academic freedom to global engagement by bodies like the Goethe-Institut.

Can this succeed? Two final points should give us reason for optimism. First, economically speaking, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are far from being great powers. And China is no less dependent on the functioning of the global economy than the West. Second, wherever people can decide free from coercion and indoctrination, they do not choose martyrdom but rather the pursuit of happiness!

This text is based on a speech delivered by the author on November 14, 2023, to the board and friends of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt.

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