

## EUROPE IS TRAPPED BY LIBERAL IMPERIALISM

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*European leaders are trapped in a strategic impasse. Donald Trump's return to office is the latest consequence of a long-lasting failure of American and Western interventions with disastrous results in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Gaza. Inventing a new internationalism which is attuned to the realities of the world is more than ever necessary if Europe is to confront the huge challenges posed by climate change, the nuclear arms race and militarised artificial intelligence.*



# 829

MARCH  
2025

The moral arrogance of United States was famously summed up by the Democratic Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: “if we have to use force it is because we are American, we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.” This ideological framework offered many American liberals the basis to support the war in Vietnam, the rebuilding of democracy in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Libyan state, all of which have had disastrous consequences for the West, the latter two in particular for Europe. As Anatol Lieven points out in *“The Masks of Imperialism”*, “liberal internationalism died in the ruins of Gaza and Beirut. Donald Trump’s return to office has only put a tin plate on the coffin.”

Jean Pierre Filiu makes much the same point in his article *“Gaza, Trump and us”*. He insists that “the responsibility of EU leaders was immense in the denial of democracy to the Palestinian people”. Every day the conflict in Gaza was prolonged “an eventual Russian success in Ukraine increased and the path of western democracies and the Global South further diverged”.

This loss of legitimacy resulted from Europe’s dependence on US global power and “the hopeless contradictions this has entailed”. The demise of liberal imperialism was, in Lieven’s view, “a failure of American and Western politicians, of experts and journalists to live up to the standard of ethics and courage on which they founded their claims to hegemony – and which they preached to the rest of the world”. He bemoans the “*megalomaniac minds of Transatlantic elites*” which seem stuck in a world sixty years out of date whose visceral opposition to Trump’s domestic agenda clouds their judgement. According to Lieven, in withdrawing “the vague promise of NATO membership for Ukraine at some indeterminate future date, Trump is neither betraying Ukraine... nor

upending the European security order” since this “quasi-commitment” has been not just reckless and dangerous but highly insincere”. Have European leaders forgotten the huge mess that characterised Western interventions in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq which wiser French and German leaders condemned, and the overthrow of the Libyan regime? Have they failed to realise that the economic power of China and India has risen hugely, that countries as diverse as Brazil, South Africa, Algeria and Morocco are determined not to sacrifice their agendas to those of the US and the EU?

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Inventing a new internationalism which is attuned to the realities of the world is more than ever necessary if we are to confront the huge challenges posed by climate change, the nuclear arms race and militarised artificial intelligence. An honest examination of what has gone wrong is more than ever necessary. The real challenge for European leaders was and still is to acknowledge that they are “on the one side, faced with an area in which the conflicts an instability typical of a postimperial area were developing at great speed, while on the other side the Western ‘number one’ which until then was acting as a benevolent hegemon, was turning into an imperial player that paid scant attention to the wishes and ideas of its allies”. Herfried Münkler wrote these words two decades ago (“**Empires**”, Polity, 2007). He argued that having failed to build the action logic of empire into their calculation, they had thought of nation states as the unit of political calculation. Those were the years when the EU dreamed of the Euro competing with the US dollar, fancied itself as the normative workshop of the world, became increasingly dependent for its gas on Russia and lectured the world, notably the Middle East on democracy while conveniently ignoring the Palestinian time bomb.

The highly militarised US state and economy “entrenched itself through the Cold War and the war on terror” while the clash of civilisations became the mantra of the US administration after the 9/11 attacks on New York. Lieven is not alone in believing that the words of recent US leaders “would have been unrecognisable to earlier generations of Americans”. In his book “**Politics Among Nations. The struggle for Power and Peace**”, Hans Morgenthau argued than “the light-hearted equation between a particular nationalism and the councils of Providence is morally indefensible, for it is the very sin of pride against which the Greek tragedies and the Bible prophets and warned rulers and ruled”. President Eisenhower wrote that

“the world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its labourers, the genius of its scientists, and the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all, in any true sens. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.” Modern Western leaders have never heard of, let alone read the Greek historian Thucydides whose Peloponnesian Wars might have taught them to think strategically.

The belief in the goodness and moral superiority of Western democracy in general, and the United States in particular, makes any empathy or understanding of the *other* impossible. The demonization of Vladimir Putin or some Palestinian leaders in much of the Western media, including high-brow newspapers does not allow any rational analysis of facts. If there is only one “right side of history”, let alone an “end of history” and the only path for human progress is US or European *democracy*, then there is no point in studying countries in any depth. Such an ideological framework has blinded the West to the failings of its own democratic model which is increasingly contested both in the US and in Europe.

European leaders are trapped in a strategic impasse as they contemplate the twin disasters of Gaza and Ukraine. Will they ever have the courage to allow – indeed encourage, a serious intellectual debate? A marginalised Europe in world affairs looks the most likely outcome, whatever the frenzy of summits and forced smiles our television screens offer every night.