

The Loss of Decency and Morality: A Conversation with Gareth Evans about our Age of Uncertainty

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As we all know, global politics is undergoing a period of profound uncertainty. Wars, geopolitical rivalries, and dwindling trust in international institutions are characteristic of our time. In particular, Washington's contradictory and often inconsistent policies have disrupted the complex post-war global system. For decades, the U.S. was seen as the anchor of the international order—a power that allies and even rivals could more or less rely on. This foundation has become highly fragile.

A key factor in the current crisis is the return to open power politics and brutal violence between states, with the resurgence of aggressive nationalism and the erosion of the norms that were painstakingly established after World War II. At the same time, the UN Security Council is largely paralyzed, while multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization have lost much of their authority. Individual political leaders cannot only be blamed for this development. Previous misguided decisions by Western states – the triumphalism of the U.S. after the Cold War, for instance, and, in particular, the disastrous Iraq War – have also undermined trust and fueled resentment.

Nevertheless, Donald Trump's second presidency has visibly accelerated this trend toward unilateralism and lack of international cooperation. Respect for allies, international conventions, and diplomatic customs have all noticeably declined. Classic instruments of soft power, not least the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and important U.S. radio and TV broadcasters such as the *Voice of America*, have simply been abolished.

Still, those countries who sacrifice international credibility for short-term domestic political gains tend to lose influence – and trust – in the long term. This is evident not only diplomatically, but also economically, for example in fluctuating currency stability or declining attractiveness as an investment and travel destination. Foreign policy is never just symbolic. It has concrete material consequences.

The responsibility to be frank

Few influential politicians address these risks as openly as former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. Open criticism of Washington by those in positions of

responsibility and moral leadership is still the exception. This also became evident by the astonished reaction to the unusually clear words of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos when he pointed out that we are witnessing a drastic “rupture” rather than just a transition in transatlantic relations.

As a former foreign minister and ex-president of the International Crisis Group, a global non-governmental organization, Evans played a key role in establishing the “responsibility to protect” concept as a global UN norm, and thus the obligation states have to protect their own citizens. Evans is an important voice of reason and moderation in the international debate. He is one of the few leading statesmen who not only pay lip service to the importance of human rights and morality in politics, but are actually convinced of it. He repeatedly points out that the Trump administration in particular has completely lost its “decency” and moral compass.

I met Evans at a conference at Tsinghua University in Beijing last summer, where he gave an impressive speech calling for the preservation of the global economic order and attacking Trump’s protectionist tariff policy as deeply immoral and harmful. Evans gladly agreed to my request to discuss the most important developments in world politics in recent years with me in a recent public online conversation in the context of the “Krasno Global Events Series” at UNC-Chapel Hill.

A temporary phase or a new terrible normality?

The crucial question for Evans is: is the current situation a temporary slump or a new terrible normality? Evans emphasized in our conversation that much will depend on who shapes US policy in the future. At present, there is a lack of figures on both the Republican and Democratic sides who credibly stand for a return to a stabilizing global leadership of the U.S. He is horrified about the prospect of either Vice President J.D. Vance or Secretary of State Marco Rubio succeeding Trump as president. For without predictable American global leadership, Evans believes, global uncertainty will only grow.

The former Foreign Minister is convinced that the often-repeated thesis that the U.S. has been “exploited” economically by the world and must defend itself with protective tariffs is only correct to a limited extent. In fact, Evans explained that the United States has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of the open trading system and has accumulated a great deal of wealth as a result. The situation is different in the area of security: many allies, especially in Europe, have invested far too little in their defense for many years. But this criticism is not new and, as Evans points out, does not justify aggressive behavior toward allies or demonstrative leniency toward authoritarian regimes.

Evans, who served for 13 years in the Labor governments of Prime Ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, including eight years as Australian Foreign Minister, is deeply

convinced that the middle powers need to play much more of a balancing and norm-oriented role in global politics. This is because they are keen on upholding the rule of law and happy to comply with international conventions so that they are not steamrolled by the major powers.

According to Evans, democracies such as Australia, Canada, Germany, and other EU countries may not have the military clout of superpowers, but they do have diplomatic credibility, institutional experience, and greater flexibility. In coordinated coalitions, they can exert considerable influence on issues such as climate policy, arms control, and trade. Evans never tires of emphasizing that this requires joint action rather than going it alone nationally.

The global pivot to Asia and China

At the same time, the geopolitical center of gravity is increasingly shifting toward Asia. Evans realizes that the relationship between China and the U.S. is characterized by great strategic ambivalence: economic interdependence coupled with security rivalry. The often-invoked “G2 world” is a reality insofar as the two superpowers already dominate the international system. However, there is reason to fear that this scenario could become dangerous, if it leads to a division of the world into exclusive spheres of influence. Stability, he is convinced, can only be achieved through rules and institutions that also democratically integrate smaller states.

Many analysts, including Evans, recognize that China is currently benefiting greatly from the loss of trust in the US. However, the growing number of Western heads of government traveling to Beijing—including the Australian, Finnish, Canadian and British heads of government while French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz are visiting soon—is less a turning away from Washington than an expression of strategic diversification: countries want to keep their economic and political options open. Nevertheless, China is benefiting from these attempts at rapprochement.

Global risks also remain high in terms of security policy. Evans, like me, believes that open war over Taiwan is unlikely in the short term, but China’s economic, military, and political pressure on the island state will increase. Deterrence, diplomatic skill, and political restraint must work together here to avoid escalation.

Dire situations in Europe and the Middle East

In Europe, meanwhile, the war in Ukraine looks more like a long-term frozen conflict. The likelihood of a quick political solution remains elusive. Kiev’s resilience depends largely on European support, for in the last resort Ukraine cannot rely fully on Trump’s backing. Gareth Evans repeatedly emphasizes, however, that NATO’s eastward

expansion or past political mistakes by the West's policy toward Russia may explain tensions with Moscow, but do not justify a war of aggression.

The Middle East also remains a powder keg. According to Evans, the Iranian nuclear issue could have been defused through consistent diplomacy; the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 agreement (the *Joint the Comprehensive Plan of Action*, JCPOA) proved to be a strategic setback. However, military escalation or forced regime change are very risky. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains one of the most tragic and persistent crises in international politics. Initiatives such as Trump's "Board of Peace" have so far been more symbolic than structurally thought out.

Ultimately, Evans paints a sobering picture in our discussion regarding the global situation. Current hopes rest less on individual superpowers than on a renewed multilateralism, diplomacy that takes human dignity seriously, and the willingness of middle powers such as the EU to assume more responsibility in global politics. Only in this way can we prevent the current era of permanent uncertainty and indecency from becoming a permanent norm.

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