

# Decline of the West: Noam Chomsky and Pervez Hoodbhoy on the world today

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## Transcript of Interview with Noam Chomsky by Pervez Hoodbhoy



Pervez Hoodbhoy: Noam! There's a whole lot of things that I want to talk to you about, but let me start with this. It appears as if the world is retribalizing. We are going back to our primal tribal loyalties – to religion, to nationalism. You see this just about everywhere. You see this with Brexit, the rise of the ultra-right in Europe, with Donald Trump in United States. And here in Pakistan you have bloodletting with Sunnis killing Shias, and everybody going after the Ahmadis and the Christians and the Hindus. And in India – that seems to be a country that has just gone mad with their protection of the cow. What's going on? There was once a time of the European Enlightenment and I know that you admire John Stuart Mill very much. Have we given up on the advances that humans made in those times? What's going on?

NC: One thing. Remember my age. I was a child in the 1930s. And I, from a child's point of view, nevertheless, could observe what's happening. This country was totally collapsing: huge unemployment, starvation, and nothing working. In Europe – Germany, Italy had fallen under fascist rule. Years before I was born, the US was in fact supporting Mussolini, openly. Germany had fallen to Nazism by the early 30s. By 1938, Austria had fallen. Czechoslovakia was taken, Spain was being conquered by fascist government of Franco. As you may know the first article I wrote – that I can remember – was in February 1939 when Barcelona fell. And the article was about the inexorable rise of fascism which looks it's going to take over the world, with everything collapsing here. And without going into details, Japan was carrying out horrendous atrocities in East Asia. It was just horrifying; much worse than now. So it's not new. We have been through much worse period, much worse. In fact, if the war had lasted another year, Germany might have actually won. It's no joke. Take a look at US now that we know about US planning. In the early years of the war, 1939 to about 1943 of after Stalingrad. US planners were planning on a future world which would be partly US dominated and partly German dominated. That is half part, or large part of Eurasia would be under Nazism. Are we facing that? I mean it's bad but it's not that. So to say that there couldn't have been a harsher attack on the Enlightenment than Nazism – supported by leading figures like Martin Heidegger who was writing in 1935 that Germany under the Nazis is the only hope of saving the magnificent Greek heritage from barbarians, East and West. I mean it's bad now, I agree, but not that. So, first thing I think we should keep the sense of proportion.

Second: under other cases. First World War was just horrifying. Right after the first World War in the United States, Woodrow Wilson's administration launched a repression, which is the worst repression in US history. Thousands of people were deported; huge numbers imprisoned; the Labor Movement was destroyed; independent thought was destroyed. That was peak, harsh repression, not anything like it since. So, you look over history. Look a little back further, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what was the US doing? It was running the worst, most hideous system of slavery in human history. They were exterminating the indigenous population step by step that was carried out well into late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tactics are by now well understood through scholarship to be literally genocidal. Not a pretty history. British were administering famines in India which killed tens of millions of people while there was plenty of food around but it was imperial policy. This went on til 1943, when Churchill decided that people in England needed white bread and so a couple of million people in Bengal had to die. That was then. It's bad now, but not what's happened before. Lots have improved.

And what's happening now? So let's take now. Several things are happening. In the Western world - US and Europe - we had.... take a look at the post-war period, post second World War. Basically two periods. There was period in 50s and the 60s which had the highest growths of American history here. No financial collapses, fairly egalitarian, first opportunities, essential reconstruction for African Americans to somehow enter into the system. Some progress in civil rights. Lots of things were wrong, but there was substantial progress. That lasted into the 70s. 70s had a switch, significant switch in social and economic policies. Reasons were... you look at... one of the main ones is the rate of profit was declining as a result of militancy of labor and other activism. And there were clear statements about it. Our memorandum, our mission reports, others about the excess of democracy, we have to return things to obedience of authority... that's across whole cross spectrum (we could get into it). And then come the shifts in neo-liberal policies which had the anticipated effect. They had restored the rate of (profit), there has been growth, not as in past but substantial. Wages and incomes for the majority had stagnated or declined in 2007, the period of euphoria about the amazing new great moderation, the wonders of new classical economics were become solved. 2007, right before the crash, the real wages of American workers were lower than there had been in 1979 when the neo-liberal experiment began. The stagnation or decline to the population and the sharp concentration of wealth is part of the self-reinforcing cycle. The policies contribute to that. The concentration contributes to political power, which carries the policies further. There has been crash after crash with the regulation. We now have - at least outside of the Republican party - a recognition that this is a serious problem but near enough has been done about it. In Europe, in many ways it's even worse. The austerity programs in Europe are run by a troika. The whole way the European system is designed is simply undermining democracy. Democratic decision making is being moved from the hands of people through their national stage to an unelected bureaucracy. European commission unelected, IMF, and the Central Bank. That's it. That's the troika. The people have almost no say in policies of their governments. They are living with all important issues, and they know it. They are getting a sense of anger all through Europe and US about centrist institutions... you know what they call center left, center right but the main established institutions, like the political parties, that have been running the country's institutions have contempt for people. The striking thing about the American elections was the election of a kind of anti-establishment republic. That's not so surprising. But the enormous success of the Sanders campaign which broke with over a century of US political history. No contributions from any of the major sources. The media disregarded with contempt the most popular politician in the country. He probably would have won the democratic party nomination if it hadn't been for party managers. Is the center collapsing? The reason I think is traceable back to social political developments that are taking place. There is more. The neo liberal form of globalization that was instituted in the 90s, since has magnified all these problems. They called it free trade, but that's not free trade. Little to do with trade altogether. Highly protectionist investor rights, systems which are setting working people in competition with one another all over the world.

PH: Thanks for putting things in perspective. And yes, I'm happy that you see that things are not as bleak as they seem to be. But although what you say has a lot of explanatory power for what's happening in the US or Brexit and so forth. But it doesn't tell me very much about why the Islamic World has exploded in this rage: rage against the US, rage against its own self. Why you have these Gao Rakshaks in India who are just tearing apart Muslims. And then such peaceful people, as the Buddhists, they have gone after the Rohingyas. I just don't understand what's going on?

NC: Let's take Burma. There was a fairly democratic system - not great - through some kind of parliamentary system. The US at the time was going to do everything it could to attack China. And one other thing was setting up Chinese nationalist tribal forces in the north of Burma to carry out attack against China. And that set back, of course. Led to chaos and destruction, and finally a military dictatorship took over. That was the end of Burmese parliamentary democracy. That was a horrible military dictatorship. Finally, in the last couple of years, it slightly relaxed. But not totally. The attacks on Muslim Rohingyas are disgraceful, monstrous atrocities. The government, including San Suu Kyi, ought to know better than support it.

India's a complicated story. The history is indeed pretty ugly. I mean the caste system in India is just a hideous disgrace. Last time I visited India. Going from Calcutta to Lahore, the difference was shocking. There's a lot of wealth in India, a lot of enlightenment, and a lot of awful things. There is the most extreme mixture of wealth, high culture, enlightenment, and hideous poverty, and disgraceful existing living standards that I've ever seen. Maybe you might see something like it in small countries of Central Africa but this is a huge country. So it's a very mixed story. Right now there is a regression.

In the Islamic World, it's been under attack for hundreds of years. There's Syria right now, the most awful place. Take a look at Syria a hundred years ago (inaudible) horrendous attack against Syrians. Syria probably lost more people during the war proportionally than any other country. A hundred thousand people were killed. Now, well Syria goes with the rest; there hasn't been an attractive picture.

There was a parliamentary government in Iran. What happened to it? They made a mistake of trying to control their own resources. So the US carried out and instigated a coup which instituted the rule of Shah. And it was receiving condemnation from Amnesty International and others. There's horrendous human rights record. Then came the overthrow of the government in 1979. What did the US do? It immediately supported an Iraqi attack against Iran. Gave strong support even to the extent of Reagan denying Saddam's responsibility for the awful atrocities against Kurds and trying to blame it on Iran. The US even permitted Saddam, they gave him a gift that they barely allowed anyone. He was allowed to attack an American ship, killing several dozen seamen and to get away with the tap on the wrist. A real friend! Israel and the USS Liberty is the only analog that I can think of. Finally, US very much won the war for Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Iranians got killed; chemical weapons used. We can go on with country after country. That's been the Middle East. It's not just the US. The French, British, plenty of internal criminals. You can run through it... Now, work for less couple of years, the worst atrocities come from ISIS. Where did that come from? Was there ISIS before the US invaded Iraq? Invasion of Iraq, among other crimes, incited sectarian conflict that barely existed before. Now it's tearing not just that country, but the whole region apart. One of the outgrowths was ISIS. Things are not happening in vacuum. Now, you take a look at them, you can see sources for all of them. Anything like these things has multiple causes. But among the causes, and often quite significant among the causes, are the actions of the Muslim sectarian states.

PH: Thanks for that. I pretty much agree with all that you said. But the US is a declining power. It's now no longer close to anything of what it was 50 years ago. Instead, we are seeing that China is coming up, and it's coming up very rapidly. You see its effects here in Pakistan very visibly. There's

Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor. They are beginning to dominate industry over here. They are building roads and you see Chinese people all over the place now. So I want to ask you, Noam. If we have a world that's dominated by China rather than the US. Is this going to be a better world, a more humane world? One that runs according to rules, one that will be less imperialistic? Should we expect a more humane outcome now that the US is in decline?

NC: First of all, I don't think this is a remote possibility. I mean it's true that the US is a declining power. It's been a declining power since 1949. The peak of US power was in 1945. At that point, the US had may be almost half the world's wealth, incredible security, control over the hemisphere, both oceans. Other industrial societies had been either devastated or severely weakened. The US economy had boomed during Second World War. With huge industrial production they were sitting at the top of the world - in fact planning to run the world. Well, something happened in 1949 - the first blow to this hegemony. The event was called in the US the loss of China. It took many years before people started noticing the presupposition that we own the world and now we lost China. So that's a terrible claim; it was a major factor in US domestic policy, the basis for McCarthyism, and harsh repression when John F. Kennedy was wondering whether to escalate in Vietnam. He was afraid that he'd be accused of the loss of Indo-China. This was seen as a huge attack on American power. Then it pretty much declined by the early 70s. The world was economically very much tri-polar, with North American US based center, European German based center, and North East Asian at that point Japan based center. Not comparable in power, but economically independent. Fairly comparable actors. In fact, you might recall in the 1980s Japan was number one in computers, and it might take over the world. Well, the US has somewhat declined since but it was that the US share in world wealth was maybe 25% lower than it had been after the Second World War.

Things are changing with Trump. Trump may in fact contribute to a rapid decline in US power. He's a special phenomenon. He is isolating the US, even from its close allies. Putting that aside, the long term tendency which I suspect is not going to change much is that the US will continue to be militarily just beyond any comparison. Economically, a very powerful state. That's misleading because in the contemporary globalized system, the system that's developed pretty much since the 1990s. This complicated value chains of corporations. Take Apple computer... the profit is mostly in the US, but it is put together, and assembled in China, mostly under the control of Taiwanese companies. The parts and components come from South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the small enterprises all over the place that are making little pieces of it. There are offices in Ireland - that's the biggest company in the world. Take a look at the globalized economy that's developed, turns out that US corporations own about half the world economy. That's probably even more than US power in 1950. Now, that's not the measure which is usually used, but it's becoming a significant measure. The national accounts still mean a lot, but not what they did 50 years ago. And of course, these corporations are based in US, supported in US both in subsidies, and militarily and diplomatically and so on. But they pretty much own the world. China is not anywhere near if we take a look at sector after sector: manufacturing, retail, commerce. US corporations are one, occasionally two. China is nowhere to be seen. China is a growing, developing power. But it has rankings of a poor country. Take a look at rankings in the UN Development Index, I think it ranks around 90. It has enormous internal problems, that the West doesn't have; enormous ecological problems, has demographic problems; there was a bump of - demographic bump for about 20 years of people of working age. It's moving significantly in many directions, but has enormous problems.

What China is doing - and Pakistan is part of this - is expanding its system of social and economic control out to the West. This been going on for some years with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with projects going into Pakistan, building Gwadar Port. Trying to avoid the stranglehold that the US and its allies have on the Malacca Straits over the oil supply. It's building alliances with Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Europe through the Asian Development Bank. It's going to

become a more and more important country outside of the United States as the US withdraws from world affairs but it's been going pretty slowly. The Chinese influence will of course increase. Is it benign? Far from it. Chinese developments in Africa...now they do build things which the Africans can use. But so did the British in India. That was pretty ugly and you can expect this to be the same. But I don't think China is anywhere near the scale of the United States.

PH: Well, once upon a time the United States had the power to make and break governments here in Pakistan and the US was all over the place. They gave arms, they gave fighter jets, destroyers, whatever to the army, navy, and so forth. They had enormous power but that's no longer true. Now, theirs is a fading presence over here. Instead, you see that it's the Chinese fighter jets which the Pakistan Air Force has. China is everywhere. Our friendship is supposedly sweeter than honey and higher than Himalayans and all that sort of stuff. Should thinking Pakistanis be worried about what's going on in terms of our relationship with China?

NC: You should be worried about any great power; China is one. And in Pakistan what you described is quite true. But in the world, that's still a very partial or small part. I mean China's presence is everywhere. They go to South America, say Brazil; Chinese goods are all over the place. Now, the trading relations in this part of the serious problem of South American failure to develop has been reliance on the rich resources of primary products in recent years being sucked up by China since China sends back cheap manufactured goods which undermine domestic manufacturers and industry. So that's a real problem. But it's not on the order of overthrowing governments, instituting military regimes, invading massive economic controls... so it's nowhere near the power of western imperial powers, US obviously, but Britain and France as well.

PH: Noam! here in Pakistan nobody seems to be worrying about nuclear weapons very much, but we have entered an extraordinary dangerous phase, where we have exchanges of artillery fires across the line of control practically every day. Then on the other hand, Pakistan has gone in for tactical nuclear weapons which are relatively easy to use and very hard to control. Similarly, India is going in for nuclear submarines and nuclear submarine launched ballistic missiles and so forth. Now, things seem to be getting very dangerous here, but it's even more dangerous in North Korea, where there's such a tense nuclear stand-off at the moment with North Korean regime developing missiles and even a Hydrogen bomb. How do you see this panning out? Are things in our control anymore?

NC: Let's take each case on its own. Take India and Pakistan. As you say India developed nuclear weapons. Pakistan then responded. As long as Pakistan tries to match India militarily (inaudible) they just can't compete this India, they can't match India (inaudible) nuclear weapons program, which is a devastating threat, not only to South Asia but to the world. So had it Pakistan first... Are you still hearing me... the internet...

At first, US opposed Indian nuclear weapons development, and at least formally it did so up to George Bush administration, which decided to support it. Various trickeries which we don't have to go through but it ended up effectively giving US support for Indian nuclear weapons and indeed twisting the arms in the International Nuclear Control Group to get them to be authorized. What about Pakistan? In the 1980s, under Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan began to develop nuclear weapons. Reagan administration pretended that they didn't know. Inconceivable that they didn't know, as they were holding intelligence assets in Pakistan. They pretended they didn't know. This defies belief. They wanted to keep funding Pakistan to carry out their policies in Afghanistan - nothing to do with helping the Afghans. The CIA chief in Islamabad, as you may recall, made that very explicit: he said we are not there to help the Afghans we want to harm Russians; we want make the Russians bleed. So for that they destroyed Afghanistan, and watched silently while Pakistan developed nuclear weapons. Now, the basic conflict - correct me if you think is wrong - but seems to me the basic India-Pakistan conflict is probably Kashmir. And until that settles in some fashion. I think you can

imagine settlements - for example Eqbal Ahmad had some very sensible proposals for settlement. I think they could be pursued. If they could be pursued, then may be India and Pakistan could relax the military confrontation and may be move towards what's already happened all through the world, partially happened already - setting up those nuclear weapons free zones. We could imagine moving toward South Asian nuclear weapon free zone, as has happened in the western hemisphere apart from the US and Canada. In Africa, almost. Africa has a nuclear weapon free zone, but has never gone into effect because of Diego Garcia. The US insists on maintaining a huge nuclear presence on the island of Diego Garcia which the Africans regard as the part of Africa. Now, Pacific has a nuclear weapon free zone, almost. At first France blocked it because they wanted to carry out nuclear tests in the islands there. And more recently the US has blocked it because wants to have nuclear weapons passage through its possessions there. But it almost works.

The most interesting is the Middle East. Right now, we are facing a major crisis - I'll come back to North Korea - we are facing a major potential crisis in case of Iran. The Trump administration, as you know, has announced they'll decertify Iran. Then comes the question whether Congress will impose sanctions? If they do that kills the US-Iranian deal. Might go on with Europe - that US-Iranian part will drop. Iran may react. And if they do, what happens next? Well, we can listen to the Republican senators, the leading ones on the right like Tom Cotton. So if we find them doing anything we'll bomb them. On the other end - I don't know what to call it - the adult end of what's called the Republican Party or the sort of sane end, you have Bob Corker just retired because he cannot handle the craziness. What he said is: our strategy is to try to drive Iran to some kind of violation, and if they carry out a violation then boom! That's the sane side. That's what we are facing in Iran. Now what's the problem with Iranian weapons? Well US intelligence has made it very explicit that the problem is it'll be part of their deterrence strategy. And the rogue states - US and Israel - cannot tolerate a deterrent. He didn't say that of course, I'm adding to it, but that's what it comes down to. So nobody is saying they want to use nuclear weapons but they could be a deterrent. And the states that like to rampage freely in the region don't want to have deterrence around. So if in fact Iran acts in a way which the administration and Congress can claim as a violation, maybe Israel bombs then the US get in to bomb. Then what happens? What the world goes up. No one knows what will happen. Is there a possible answer? Yes, straightforward. The Europeans know the answer, in fact everybody in the world knows the answer. Just continue with the agreement. The agreement in my view is too harsh on Iran - that's another story. But the specific fact is that they are living up to it, so pursue it. Is there a further possibility? The further possibility is to accept Iran's proposal of establishing a nuclear weapon free zone in the Middle East. That will be very important. Iran is in favor of it. Other non-aligned countries are pushing it for years. And the US and Britain are committed to it. Committed to it! No way they will say it. When they decided the bomb to attack Iran in 2003, as a pretext they invoked a treaty, an agreement with Iran. But after the Kuwait War - now, if you read that agreement - take a look at the Article 14, it says the US and Britain will be committed to establishing a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. No way can they refer to that for obvious reasons but you can find it. Everybody in the world, at least in theory, is in favor of it. This never happens because the US blocks it. Every year in nuclear review sessions everyone says it- last one, 2015. Everyone knows that's impossible and of course everyone knows why. Exactly one reason - that would mean Israel's nuclear weapons would have to come under international inspection. So, is there a long term solution, yes possibly.

We have covered most of the world, except for North Korea. Is there a possible solution there, yes. In fact, everyone knows what it is, accept the Chinese proposal with Russian support, and North Korean acquiescence. It's called a double freeze. North Korea freezes its nuclear weapons programs. The US calls off threatening military maneuvers on North Korea's border, like no nuclear capable bombers flying over the border. That sort of thing. The North Koreans have some memories. I don't want to go into it, but North Korea was absolutely wiped out in a savage assault, mostly after the

war had settled down at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Pure savagery and brutality. Real crimes if you remember, like bombing dams, so on and so forth. That's the first step towards solution. What comes next? Negotiations, diplomacy. Could they succeed? They could. Try to look at the record. No time to go through it, but every time when there have been repeated times when an agreement was reached, in fact in 2005, even an agreement in which North Korea had agreed to dismantle its program in return for some concessions by the West, like US ending threat of regression, providing a low uranium enrichment plan for research and medical purposes, not interfering with financial actions and so on. Bush administration merely backed off, so North Korea started building weapons again. Now, in fact it's now a horrible place, no doubt, but it's been planned kind of... to protect diplomacy. That could continue. So there are possible answers there too.

Now, the Sunshine Policy of South Korea for the time was that to move towards relaxing tensions by commercial, cultural, other interactions that might break into the North Korean system, which is hideous no doubt. But the regime is committed to its own survival, not surprisingly. And it is also committed to economic development. There has been some economic development in the past years that could be exploited as a move towards more peaceful relations – may be towards denuclearization of that region. So I think everywhere you look... and what about major nuclear powers? I tell you they are committed on to Non Proliferation Treaty too, could face efforts to eliminate them. And if there's enough pressure, may be that could happen. So I think it's a horrible threat and danger, but it's not out of human control. It's all under human control, every point.

PH: It's quite incredible Noam that you wrote your first article in 1939. You have had a lifetime of activism. You've been fighting against all the wrong things that that the US has done. But do you see the world as being better today, as compared to let's say the end of the Second World War, which we can leave out as a period of major atrocities. But subsequent to that, do you see any kind of hope or improvement as time has gone on. You know there's Steven Pinker's book "The Better Angels of our Nature" and of course, you must be familiar with it. He says that over the last 5000 years or so, or since recorded human history, we've been steadily improving. Is that the case? If we look around, it doesn't seem to be so. What do you say about that?

NC: Well, let's put that biggest book aside... I don't think it has many deep problems. Part of it is correct. One major part is that since 1945, the European countries have recognized that they cannot play their favorite game anymore. For centuries, Europe was the most savage place in the world. The Thirty-Years War in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that probably killed two-third of the population of German. European savagery then expanded over much of the world with consequences I don't have to describe. But they were recognized, and the last cataclysm was of course the Second World War. That was recognized by 1945 that they cannot play their game anymore. If there's a major war among European powers, we are all finished. So Europe has been at peace, which is not a small thing if you look at the past centuries. That's a huge thing. Another document that's true is... I don't think there's anything with better angels by nature, there are worst devils of our nature that which created means of destruction which can wipe us all out and recognition of that is a major factor in this very significant change. I should say the scholarly literature has a very different explanation – liberal democracy and so on. I'm skeptical about that.

Another truthful thing is that since the Enlightenment, there has been among a section of the population a period of advance of rationality, moral commitment, recognition of human rights and so on. We should remember that the period of the Enlightenment and afterwards was the worst period of western imperialism with horrible consequences all over the world. In the western hemisphere, population of maybe 80 million people went down to hundreds of thousands. And in the northern part, may be 18 million down to may be a million or something – a huge slaughter. That was the period of Enlightenment. But for part of the world, it is true that there was significant moral, intellectual progress. And that extended in the last I think to the United States. It's a much more

civilized country than it was 60 years ago in many respects. Women's rights, for example, have enormously changed; civil rights were pretty awful but have improved, opposition to repression has increased substantially. When the US invaded Vietnam, there were no protests appeared against the worst crimes since the Second World War. Took years before they developed relevance. That's changed. There is also the beginnings – much too late – but beginnings of serious concerns about environmental catastrophe which is going to do us in unless significant steps are taken. Then finally, there is growing recognition of that. I don't mean enough, but some. I mean all of this is progress, not total progress, there is also regression. Things going in all directions. But I think the general tendency in the long run is towards somewhat more humane, civilized societies.

PH: Well, thanks for that. It's been a long interview. And I am not going to let you go, but there's a last question. You've had a very long life of academics and activism, and you've seen things go downhill. But you've never given up. What is it that keeps you going, what is it that keeps giving you giving hope and keeps giving you that energy to just go for it.

NC: So many things there. Lots of good things, as I've mentioned. And there are a lot of bad things which means there's more to do. Very simple.

PH: Oh, you are a terrific guy, Noam. It was such a pleasure talking to you. Take care. Bye.

NC: Pleasure to talk to you. Bye.

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**Noam Chomsky and Pervez Hoodbhoy**

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