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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

TRUMP, BIDEN, AND THE FUTURE OF THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

The world is at a turning point as major institutions and alliances are being tested as never before in the post-Cold War period. On this episode, my colleague Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution press, speaks with Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger—once Germany's representative in Washington and London and also former German deputy foreign minister—about his new book, *World in Danger: Germany and Europe in an Uncertain Time*, just published by Brookings.

In the conversation, you'll hear Ambassador Ischinger explain four challenges to the global order, describe what impact the presidency of Donald Trump has had on the rules based international system, and caution against too much euphoria about the election of Joe Biden to be the next president.

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And now, here's Bill Finan with Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger.

FINAN: Fred, thank you. Ambassador Ischinger, thank you for joining us for a conversation about your new book. You begin your book with a startling statement: "The entire established liberal world order is threatening to give way and nothing is the way it was before." That, you say, is the result of one man who took office as president of the United States in January 2017, Donald Trump. Do the soon-to-be ex-president's actions pose an existential threat to the world order? Is that what you're saying? Is this finally, truly the post-Cold War world that some of those have been waiting for to be born since 1991?

ISCHINGER: Well, first of all, Bill, thank you very much for having this conversation. I've been, of course, observing, staying up late at night during the election a week ago or so. And while I think that yes, indeed, the appearance of Donald Trump on the world stage as the president of the United States has had an enormous impact on global order—on our belief in a rules-based international system that hopefully we can maintain—I wouldn't give all the blame only to him for the impression that we're currently having of a world under threat of world order falling apart.

I would say there are actually four principal reasons. First, the reemergence of great power rivalries. Think of China and think of current Russian activities, etc., challenging the role also, of course, of the United States.

Second, in our Europe-Atlantic context, the demise, the end, the shattering, so to speak, of your Atlantic order. 1990 was the year when we had the Charter of Paris signed and we thought that we had established rules for the entire world from the United States to Vladivostok. Apparently not.

And third, the pandemic, the pandemic, as others have observed, has tended to accelerate preexisting global trends. And unfortunately, most of the global trends that existed at the beginning of this year were not good trends, but negative trends. So the pandemic has intensified and accelerated that.

And then, of course, on top of all of that, we had the disruptive role of the president elected four years ago, who is currently, of course, still in office.

So, yes, I think we are witnessing a moment where many things which we thought were certain were certainties all of a sudden no longer certain where our world order, the one we thought was a given, is falling apart.

FINAN: So, we have these tectonic shifts, as it were, that you're pointing to that it's not just Donald Trump, but your book makes also clear that overlaying that is there's a lot of

things going on, there are some major nodes of upheaval. Can you point to a few of those that trouble you the most?

ISCHINGER: What troubles me the most, really, is the worry that the idea of the West is losing speed, that the West is threatened by extinction. This is why my team and I chose at the beginning of this year, when we were looking for a motto for the Munich Security Conference 2020, we invented a word which I'm not sure belongs to the English language. We called it "Westlessness," with a question mark. Is the West falling apart and is the West maybe becoming less central to global order? If you answer these two questions affirmatively, we would be or we will be in really bad shape.

So that is my biggest worry, because my country, Germany, after the tragedies and the horrors of two wars and the Holocaust and everything that came with it and the guilt, we were graciously invited by the West, by the United States and her allies, to join the West in the post-World War period. So now we've finally made it. We've become proud members of the West and here we go, the West is losing speed, is losing respect, is falling apart. That must not be allowed to happen.

FINAN: So in 30 years, we've gone from the end of history to the end of the West. Not a great trajectory. You also see grounds for hope, optimism. You write about that in the book.

ISCHINGER: If you are, as I am, a practicing, or at least I should say a former practicing diplomat, you can only survive if you are an optimist. Diplomacy is optimism. Diplomacy is to believe that problems are there to be tackled and finally resolved.

So, yes, I do believe that we should not fall into a general depression. There are reasons to be optimistic and hopeful books have been written about it. Think of the book by Professor Steven Pinker and others. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted from

extreme poverty over the last couple of decades. No great power wars have been fought now for decades.

Unfortunately, there's also bad news. The number of displaced persons, of refugees, the numbers have risen. But generally speaking, I think we're in a world that can make progress. The question is, can we responsible citizens of responsible states, hopefully, can we make a difference and make sure that our optimism will turn out to be justified? That's the challenge.

FINAN: Your book talks about your tenure as ambassador to the United States, among your other diplomatic work, and I have to say, when you write about yourself as ambassador to United States, there's some delightful anecdotes throughout that makes it incredibly pleasurable to read. And I'd like you to tell us first, though, about your first day as U.S. ambassador in the United States.

ISCHINGER: Well, that was a remarkable day. Believe it or not, I had arrived in Washington with my wife Jutta, on a flight from Berlin on the 10th of September 2001. And so 9/11 was going to be my first day in the office. As you can imagine, my level of excitement was high. I was in my new ambassadorial office really very early, at eight o'clock in the morning or 7:45 or so. And I tried to get acquainted with my telephone equipment and everything else in the office. And then of course, at nine o'clock or so, the world changed all of a sudden. And my entire ambassadorial tour, which in the words of my chancellor who had said goodbye to me a couple of days earlier and who had said to me, "I hope you can enjoy these next three or four or five years, regard them as a vacation"—this vacation turned into crisis management. The world changed. I saw a big black cloud of smoke rising. I saw it from my office window in the German embassy in Washington, D.C., where you can't see the Pentagon, but I could see this huge black cloud of smoke rising from the burning kerosene in the Pentagon.

So, my entire ambassadorial tour for the next five and a half years was, of course, totally dominated by 9/11, what this meant to the United States—my host country, what this meant to transatlantic relations, and what this meant to global order. Crisis management for five and a half years instead of vacation.

FINAN: No vacation at all. I want to come back to those first five and half years in a moment, especially the Iraq war, which plays a central role in your book. But first, I wanted to touch on something else, too, and that's your book has something that I haven't seen in other books by former diplomats. And it's extremely interesting to read to them what it means to be an ambassador, the protocols and the symbolism, and the importance of those. What do you think are the most essential of those elements of being an ambassador?

ISCHINGER: I would argue that the single most important ability of an ambassador needs to be the listening ability. Of course, you are expected to give speeches to talk and to explain your own country, et cetera, et cetera. But if you can't listen, you will never, as an ambassador, understand the intricacies, the history, the sensitivities of your host country, and you will not be capable of fully comprehending what's actually going on because you don't know the details.

So, listening, understanding, and trying to comprehend what's behind the words that you are hearing is important. Let me give you a brief example. At one point during my tenure as ambassador, I received an invitation to come to Richmond, Virginia. And to talk in Richmond, Virginia, about how postwar Germany had tried to seek reconciliation with her neighbors and with the victims, of course, of the Holocaust, Jewish people, the state of Israel, the neighbors we had attacked—I mean, from Poland to the Netherlands, the Soviet Union, etc.

And I said, why would the people in Richmond of all places be interested in hearing me speak about this? And then I began to understand that in the city of Richmond, the

differences between the warring parties of the Civil War, the memories of that, have been kept alive until today. Of course, I was totally aware of that. But trying to listen to representatives of the Black community in Richmond and the non-Black community and others, I finally began to understand that there was still a need to build bridges and to learn how finally to accomplish full reconciliation, et cetera. And that, for me, was a fascinating experience. I will be eternally grateful for the invitation to participate in this setting and learning about the long lasting effects of American history from the middle of the 19th century to the present.

FINAN: And the fact that that history is so still alive, the divisions that were there, unfortunately, I want to shift the focus to America and Germany today. What has changed most dramatically with the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president?

ISCHINGER: I think the single most important and potentially lasting effect is that the level of trust, which had been built up over several generations from the late 1940s on through President Reagan and through President Clinton and then finally from President Obama, that this level of trust between the peoples of both sides, but also the governments and the political elites, has been attacked and has suffered and then suffered. Germans will now want to ask themselves, so if we find that we can have a wonderful relationship with the incoming, the next administration—assuming that this is now clear that's it's the Biden administration that is going to be incoming—assuming we can have a great relationship with them, and we will most probably, who can give us a guarantee that four years hence something like the Donald Trump phenomenon may not hit us again? In other words, how sustainable, how lasting would agreements be? This kind of doubt did not exist in the pre-Donald Trump era. And I think it will take a huge effort on both sides of the Atlantic to overcome this lingering question. How can we trust each other that whatever we agree on will

have a lasting effect, will be sustainable, can be carried through not only this administration, but maybe the next one and the next one?

FINAN: Do you think that the sense of trust in the United States has been erased even more so than it had been in 2003 with the Iraq war? You write what will be important to historians and anyone else who's interested in American foreign policy in that period about the U.S., Germany, Europe and others in the Iraq war. And that seems to have been a very brutal moment in diplomatic relations. Is this equal to that or is it a class apart?

ISCHINGER: The conflict, the disagreement, the confrontation over the question of whether it's a good or a bad idea to intervene militarily in Iraq was a disagreement about one issue. Forty years earlier, we had a disagreement also about one issue, namely about the Vietnam War. You had parts of the U.S. population on this side and others on that side. And the same was happening in Europe. We had a disagreement about one issue.

I think during the Trump administration, the disagreement or the doubts began to go much further. They were not focused on one policy issue. They affected the question, is this still our partner? If the ultimate authority in America, the president of the United States, speaks of European allies, of European partners who regard themselves as allies of the United States, he speaks of them as a foe, as an adversary; if he creates rather fundamental doubts about the usefulness, the validity of the NATO Article 5 guarantee, et cetera, et cetera. That was far more profound a question than the simple question about Iraq yes or no, which is why the difference about the Iraq war is much easier to overcome and say, okay, that was history, we had a problem. Now let's tackle the next issue and hopefully we can agree and do it jointly. But the last four years have really created far more fundamental doubts. And that, I think, will be our joint challenge for the incoming administration, but also for the European allies. We need to do our own homework in order to make this relationship a trusting relationship in both directions.

FINAN: That was actually my next question, is how will or does Germany view the election of Joe Biden as president of the United States? What changes in the relationship might we expect to see with his election or hope to see?

ISCHINGER: I'll give you an answer in two parts. First, if you look at the German and more generally the European media reaction, the political classes react, it's overwhelmingly positive, of course, overwhelmingly. So that's great. The second part of my answer is, and that's my personal view, I warn against too much euphoria because I am aware of the fact that even if he wanted to, the next president of the United States will have serious constraints, he will have not a totally free run because he will predictably maybe not enjoy the full support of both houses of Congress. There will be 70 million American voters who voted for the second time for Donald Trump. And how will this play out in the coming years? When you have the next election cycle is only two years from now, you have elections coming up.

So, I warn against too much euphoria and I try to tell my fellow Germans the worst thing we could now do is to lean back and say now transatlantic paradise will happen because Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will be such nice people and they will want to work with Europe, etc. No, we need to do our homework. We need to be forthcoming on such issues as military burden sharing, on trade issues, on how we could conceivably coordinate on China, which I think will be one of the big, big, big issues for transatlantic friction or for transatlantic cooperation.

So, we need to do our homework. We shouldn't wait for Joe Biden to bring us the goodies. We should offer broad based cooperation.

FINAN: A fraught future still. Ambassador Ischinger, thank you for taking the time to come by and talk to us today about your new book, *World in Danger*.

ISCHINGER: Thank you so much, Bill. It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

DEWS: You can find Ambassador Ischinger's book, "World In Danger," published by the Brookings Institution Press, on brookings.edu or wherever you like to get books.

The Brookings Cafeteria podcast is possible only with the help of a team of amazing colleagues. My thanks go out to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and our intern Ryan Jacobs; to Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, who does the book interviews; to Marie Wilkin, Adrianna Pita, and Chris McKenna for their collaboration; and finally, to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.