

Transcript TrustTalk Interview Ned Lebow

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Voice-Over: Welcome to TrustTalk. Our guest today is Professor Richard Ned Lebow, professor of international political theory in the Department of War Studies at King's College in London. He has taught international relations and strategy at the National and Naval War Colleges in the U.S. and Europe and served as a scholar in residence in the Central Intelligence Agency during the Carter administration. In this interview, he talks about the current threat of war in Ukraine and his view that the West should have no interest in having Ukraine as part of NATO. He distinguishes trust between diplomats and trust between nations and puts it in historical perspective using historic examples. He shows the disinformation in warfare is as old as war itself. Your host today Severin de Wit.

Podcast Host: Ned. Thank you for being our guest today. As a professor at King's College Department of War Studies, you have written and taught extensively on peace and war. It's both sad and bitter that we have this interview at a time of heightened political tensions between Russia and the US, Europe about Ukraine. Before we delve deeper into trust in international relations, I wanted to start off by saying that you as a child born in France during the Second World War and I as a post-war child born in Germany, we are more than 70 years after the greatest war in Europe, once again faced with a threat of war in Europe. Doesn't that scare you?

Ned Lebow: It does scare me. And one of the things that frighten me is that as we recede from these horrible events, younger generations are no longer scarred by them the way we are, and they no longer have the same commitments to peace and tolerance, and respect for others that we learned is so essential for our lives and everyone else's

Podcast Host: In one of the Netherlands largest newspapers, the NRC, Caroline de Gruyter, its foreign policy commentator, wrote in her column last week that asking Ukraine to renounce NATO membership, which German Chancellor Olaf Scholz hinted at, sounds reasonable but seems extremely dangerous. The fundamental post-war principle in Europe is that you don't change borders with threats of violence. Would you agree with her?

Ned Lebow: So, not entirely. I think there are two separate issues here. One is whether the West has any interest in having Ukraine as part of NATO. I don't believe we do, for two reasons. I think it's a very provocative move with regard to Russia. Even a more sensible leader than Putin would be angered by it. Secondly, Ukraine is not the most stable country. We would be creating a situation where the tail could wag the dog, where NATO could be dragged into a conflict it doesn't want, where Ukraine, emboldened by being in NATO, would act less with less restraint than it might otherwise. So that's the one side of the issue. The second side is giving in to threats. And of course, giving into threats is never a good idea. And Putin should not be rewarded for using force. I had been hopeful that there might be some diplomatic resolution where the U.S. and NATO would give a quiet promise that it really had no intention of inviting Ukraine into NATO and that Putin would accept that and draw down his forces. That doesn't seem to be happening. I think both sides have handled the situation very badly. The West, and particularly the Biden administration, has made it a public confrontation, issuing one statement and one threat after the other, publicly, rather than quietly to Putin, making it that much more costly for Putin to back down. They're almost pushing him into using military force.

Podcast Host: Interesting. Well, you know what? Let's move away from current-day politics. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote about the ideal moral community by, I'm quoting him, "making ourselves worthy of trust by avoiding malicious and deceptive action and by being upright and candid". But in international relations is being candid not seen as a weakness?

Ned Lebow: Well, yes and no. So if we look at how the most serious conflicts that are resolved peacefully get resolved, it's in part through candor. So let me just give you three historical examples. Britain and France, which almost went to war in 1898, ultimately through diplomacy, became good friends and allies. Egypt and Israel resolved their differences. So war receded, although they certainly don't have what one would call friendly relations. And the Kissinger Mao Tse-Tung, Chou En-lai, Nixon negotiations led to a very serious improvement in Sino-American relations. In each of these conflicts, it was necessary for both sides to convince the other that they wanted accommodation and to live in peace, and to act in ways that not only express their candor but put their cards on the table and demonstrate it. And those gestures, which ultimately became reciprocal, pave the way for these accommodations. So candor is a very important part of international relations, and it's only a certain brand of a crazy realist who thinks that all ethics stops at the water's edge and has no role to play in international relations. In a book I published

this past year with Cambridge University Press called "Ethics and International Relations, A Tragic View", I made the case that ethical behavior is appropriate to international relations, not on any moral basis, but rather because I could demonstrate empirically that if states behaved in accord with what we're seeing as the conventional ethics of the day, their policies were more likely to succeed. And when they violated those norms, their policies were less successful. So as a purely practical matter, I think I can demonstrate historically how relevant ethics and candor are to international relations. Now, this doesn't mean that every moment of the day that one should be completely candid. We don't do this in our personal relationships, either. You know, occasionally we tell in English what a call, I mean if one can still use the term these days, "white lies", you know, little lies, which we do so often to avoid embarrassing ourselves or other people. That's a very different kind of proposition.

Podcast Host: Conventional wisdom holds that trust is important, even essential for stable regimes, especially democratic ones, yet, political scientists warn for several years that democracy is in decline around the world. Larry Diamond of Stanford University has described the trend as what he called a "democratic recession". What caused the breakdown of trust?

Ned Lebow: Well, I think Larry is not alone in arguing that the democratic governments and procedures that we've taken for granted in core areas of the West for so long are now at risk, and the superficial answer, I think, is the rise of anti-democratic right-wing nationalist political movements, supported by people who are angry at their governments and who are angry about their own situation and somehow see or believe that their situation is connected to what a government has or hasn't done. That's the root cause of it. Now, in a more fundamental sense, we are going through a period in which much of the working class and certainly much of the lower middle class have lost out, relatively speaking economically, and certainly have lost out even more in questions of esteem and status, and they were once seen as central to the nation and to the culture. They believe themselves and with some reason to be more marginal. We know that offences to self-esteem are far more serious in the eyes of people than even offences to their material well-being. And this lack of status has been appealed to effectively by these right-wing forces. So unless we can address the fundamental problem, this is going to continue and like global warming, scientists warn us that we can get to a tipping point where what we do can no longer reverse things. And I gather from recent articles in SCIENCE that we seem to have reached this with respect to the tundra in Canada and in Russia. It's now warming at a rate that nothing

we can do will stop all the rest of it from warming. And certainly, if I take the case of the United States, if the Republicans win back the Senate and the House and God forbid, the presidency too, the future of democracy is very much at risk.

Podcast Host: Even over the tipping point

Ned Lebow: It may be that this may be the we may be the tipping point, maybe the next presidential election. And currently, I mean, Biden is handicapped because the Democrats have such a thin control in the Senate, and two of the Democratic senators are really Republicans. In fact, they're funded by Republican interest groups.

Podcast Host: Let's talk about another element of international relations, the role of diplomacy. In keeping the peace, we rely on diplomats abilities to mitigate tensions, to resolve differences and overcome estrangement. But that requires a capacity to elicit trust and an ability to trust in return. But how can you build trust in a world where a major power like Russia uses an asymmetric arsenal that includes military invasion, cyber attacks, disinformation, support for fringe political groups and the weaponization of energy resources, organized crime and corruption?

Ned Lebow: So let's separate two issues here, trust among diplomats and trust among nations. We can certainly have the former without the latter. We have many examples where individuals in opposing states who serve in diplomatic roles have come to respect and trust one another and even become friends, and they have in on occasions where the context has been appropriate, either acted in ways to jump-start accommodations or to accelerate them when they happened. So I remember just one example from the Cold War. James Goodby, an American diplomat and Alexander Kerensky, a Soviet diplomat, who were both in Vienna in charge of the conventional forces negotiations for their respective country. Both saw these positions as a dead end because these negotiations have been going on for years and had no result. And this was largely because both Moscow and Washington were pushed by their respective allies to have the negotiations, but neither wanted a successful outcome because it would have reduced their control over their respective allies. But situations had changed and Kerensky and Goodby worked out what they thought would be a sensible accommodation together. And then each side cabled back to its capital, suggesting that this was a proposal from the other side and they set in motion a process

that led to an outcome not too dissimilar from the arrangement they had informally agreed upon at the outset.

Podcast Host: Quite brilliant.

Ned Lebow: Yes. And we have other examples like this. It doesn't always work. So consider the role of Prince Lichnowsky, the German ambassador to the Court of St. James, in the years before 1914 in World War I, an honourable, decent guy committed to peace who established a close working relationship with his British peers. So much so that after war was declared, Grey and Asquith and others embraced him before he left and asked what they could do, if anything, for his family. And he tried his damndest to communicate to Berlin what the British position was and would be if the Germans invaded Belgium. And of course, his warnings were dismissed. He nevertheless played the role of an honest diplomat in contrast to the German ambassador in St. Petersburg, Von Pourtalès, who simply told Berlin what it wanted to hear and emboldened it rather than restraining it. So there's always some leeway for diplomats, and we have to encourage it, train our diplomats well. And if you're a political leader, you should listen to them.

Podcast Host: So that's about the trust among diplomats. And then you made the distinction between diplomats and the trust between nations.

Ned Lebow: Correct. So to develop trust among countries, you have to in the first instance, reach accommodations and agreements. So here diplomats are essential to bringing that about. With agreements over time, if we have a positive trajectory, countries cooperate together. Look at France and Germany in the post-war era. How much suspicion there was of Germany, understandably in 1945 and how trust built gradually, first among diplomats and bureaucrats and officials who cooperated and then between governments because they learn to trust one another and they communicated with one another, honestly. And finally, and this is most importantly, among peoples. People began to create personal relationships across borders, and now you have a situation where I recall I was invited to the D-Day celebrations, it must have been in 2014. It was the first one to which the Germans were invited, where the German foreign minister said that the D-Day was an important step in Germany's liberation, that was how it was framed. And what struck me as most interesting was a sondage, a public opinion poll that was published in Le Figaro, the leading French newspaper, in which the French people were asked to rate different

countries as trustworthy and their friends. And the one that scored highest was Germany. The United States came second, Britain came third, and that was due to the combination of leaders, of governments of peoples. And it created a pattern and one very different from even considering three wars since 1870. That's a remarkable accomplishment, and it could not have been done without trust. And the final point, if I can here, is if we think of personal relations, there's a model that applies to international relations. When we cooperate with people, we make friends with them. And since you quoted Kant, I'll quote Plato. And from Plato's perspective, once you have a friend, you are encouraged to see the world and you through the eyes of the friend. And you realize that your own views of everything are parochial, that there are other views out there. And if you want to keep your friendship and the respect of your friend, you have to compromise and do things that help both. When you do that over time, you develop a common identity and then your interests become more similar and then you develop a more common identity. And it's common identities and trust that are the core of all relationships, whether they're interpersonal or international.

Podcast Host: All right. I talked about the effect of disinformation earlier in international relations, but frankly, it's not all that new. Stalin used disinformation tactics in both World War II and the Cold War. Soviet intelligence used the term "maskirovka", or military deception to refer to a combination of tactics, including disinformation, simulation, camouflage, and concealment. So what's the difference with 2022?

Ned Lebow: So everybody, especially in wartime, uses these techniques. You probably know that General Patton was put in charge of a non-existent army in Kent, and they had all of the radio traffic as if it were a real army to strengthen the German belief that an allied invasion would come in the Port de Calais to keep German forces away from Normandy. They even put ashore the body of a dead British soldier with phony papers about the invasion in a place where the Spanish recovered him and passed it on to the Germans. This was all very cleverly done. So a moment of levity, when I was in the CIA, I attended a talk on disinformation and it was about Soviet strategies and tactics of misinformation and maskirovka. And at the end of the talk, the speaker said, and of course, they haven't done any of this against us. And there were several of us afterwards who thought this was hilarious because if they were successful, you wouldn't know and they were, you'd become perfectly convinced that they had never done it. Right?

Podcast Host: Yeah.

Ned Lebow: So clearly, this has been going on. It's harder today because we have such better means of intelligence. In fact, The Economist had a rather nice article this week on how some at least of the information about the Russian build-up was provided by commercial satellites, and that these commercial satellites can distinguish objects down to the size of five or six centimetres. Which is very impressive. This used to be the sole preserve of military satellites

Podcast Host: I think your contribution "Trust in International Relations" appeared in a book, right, in the "Art of Creating Power"

Ned Lebow: Yeah. I think this was the Festschrift for Laurie Friedman.

Podcast Host: I see, yeah, that's true. And I think you wrote there and I'm quoting you, "Deterrence theory and realist models of international relations assume that trust is in short supply". So what do you mean by that?

Ned Lebow: So if you look at, let's say NATO, NATO depends on trust. If one country is expected to do something, the others, for the most part, don't spend resources monitoring it and trying to verify that it will do it. Well, it's taken at its word. If, on the other hand it violates it, then you have serious issues. So let's take a contemporary issue, which is not security related. The Swiss banks, so they have violated their norms, they haven't been truthful. And now the recent news about the accounts for all kinds of people who should be behind bars for a whole range of reasons. And using the laws to go after people who expose what the banks are doing rather than changing their practices. So now the European Union is considering there's a technical term for it that I forget, but putting the Swiss banks in the same category as countries for which they have no trust. So there will be procedures in place governing money transfers and transparency that will be extremely forceful, costly to the Swiss and will seriously limit their financial operations if the EU goes ahead with this. The U.S. has already imposed billions of dollars of fines on them, and there's no trust. So if this happens, the Swiss are at a serious disadvantage. These are the banks that are seen to behave better, and it may be, people are suggesting that the whole banking industry needs serious revision and this may happen in due course. And why? Because economic relations, more than anything else, depend on trust I have as we're speaking as you

know, I told you before the interview, I'm sitting in my bedroom doing this because our pergola and terrace, all the concrete was ripped off. The walls were torn down, it's all being rebuilt and done, so it doesn't leak and so it looks much nicer. All right. I have to have trust in the people who are working for me. And it turns out that in my town of Cortona, Tuscany, this is not a problem because everybody knows everybody else and people who work here want to be seen well by other people. And this comes back to Emmanuel Kant, who remember talks about the crooked timber of humanity and suggests that people only behave well because, the crooked timber of humanity that the wood from which human beings are made is very uneven. Emmanuel Kant says that people only behave well because they want others to think they're good. I mean, they do it quite self-consciously, but once they behave well time and time again, it becomes routinized. So in my community, people behave well because they want the respect of others. And if the working men charge me too much or didn't finish roughly when they say they would, they would lose face in the community. So trust prevails and because trust prevails, I'm willing to pay them for half the work before they begin and do everything else to make it easy for them and everybody benefits and normal, relations across states rely on that kind of trust.

Podcast Host: My last question because we are reaching the limit of our podcast, my last question is also about your article where you criticize two highly regarded works Robert Putnam's account of social capital and Robert Axelrod's research on tit-for-tat. How does that relate to trust?

Ned Lebow: So, Axelrod's argument exists in a world where there is no trust. The tit-for-tat doesn't rely on trust. It relies purely on self-interest. And I criticized it, not on the basis of trust which one could, but that the game is set up to produce a particular result and that the game doesn't map well onto international relations. You know, if you defect and the other side defects in a certain situation, that could be the end of the game. Moreover, it assumes that we all can distinguish a tit for a tat. And yet, Axelrod told me and I found the same when I played the game with my war college students, that they often couldn't tell the distinction between accommodation and defection. And this is true. You can document it. You could in Soviet American relations. So it's a wonderful game, but it tells you very little about the real world. And Putnam, the Putnam issue, Putnam does talk about trust, and he's concerned with building solidarity. And I think in that sense, it's a more useful starting point than Axelrod. But Putnam's notion of what produces trust is recreating a world of the 1950s in America. You know, it's it's very parochial, it's very conservative. And it, of course, in a way with the bowling, it missed the

entire point that bowling leagues collapse for reasons that had nothing to do with solidarity. Solidarity finds other formats these days, but they may well be that there's less of it and that we pay a big price for it. On the other hand, research into who votes for Donald Trump and supports anti-democratic movements in the US indicates that it's most apparent in lower middle-class Republican communities where there's a high degree of solidarity.

Podcast Host: Interesting, interesting. That's a nice note, Ned to conclude our conversation.

Ned Lebow: I enjoyed it very much, Severin

Podcast Host: Me too, Ned. I wish you all the best, good health

Ned Lebow: I hope our paths cross in person sometime.

Podcast Host: I hope so, too. For me, a good reason to have a look at your wonderful new home in Italy.

Ned Lebow: Thank you. You're welcome. If you're passing through Tuscany, let me know

Podcast Host: I will. Ok, Ned, take care.

Ned Lebow: You too. Bye-bye. Bye-bye.

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