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„Coalition of the unWilling and unAble? A Book Talk with John Deni"

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Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at the University of Heidelberg, my name is Anja Schüler. Two months into his presidency, Joe Biden convened his first formal news conference last Thursday, and he had a few things to say about foreign policy, which understandably has been on the back burner because of the pandemic. But we got a glimpse about how he views his country's role on the global stage. The future of American geopolitics is also going to be the topic of today's conversation. My guest is John Deni, Research Professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute and an Adjunct Lecturer at the American University's School of International Service. Previously, he worked for eight years as a political adviser to the U.S. military in Europe, and during that time, he also was an adjunct lecturer at Heidelberg University's Institute for Political Science. John Deni holds degrees from the College of William and Mary, American University, and George Washington University, and he has a new book out entitled *The Coalition of the unWilling and the unAble: European Realignment and the Future of American Geopolitics*. John Deni is joining us today just from outside Washington, D.C. Welcome to the HCA podcast!

John Deni: Anja, thank you so much, it's a pleasure to be with you and to be speaking once again with those of the HCA and Heidelberg University communities, which I miss immensely. Let me also add a brief administrative note: Because I am a U.S. government employee, I need to note the comments I'll make today are going to be mine alone and don't reflect those of the U.S. government.

Anja Schüler: Right. We also have a little disclaimer on our website saying exactly that: all our podcast guests hold their views and no one else's. I would like to start out by briefly revisiting that news conference that I just mentioned. In it – in so many words – Joe Biden argued that the United States will have to prove to an increasingly skeptical world that both American democracy and its model of democratic capitalism still work, and that they are superior to autocratic systems. "We've got to prove democracy works," said the president, and your book advances the very same argument.

John Deni: It does. I begin the book by outlining what the challenges are that the United States faces over the next decade, and I then dive into examining how and why the United States needs allies. It needs and wants allies by its side. In short, I argue that democracy, the international liberal order, even glaciers, are all in retreat. And so, we

in the U.S. prefer to operate with allies. It's rather ironic given our superpower status, but this has been a consistent theme of our grand strategy now for at least a couple of decades, from certainly in the post-Cold War era, from Bill Clinton, a very pro-transatlanic president, up through Donald Trump, even in his national security strategy – and we know how he felt about our European partners. So, across all these administrations, our desire to work with allies, to work with allies in Europe has been very, very consistent. I make the case in the book that the United States has not needed allies more so now than any time since maybe the end of the Cold War, maybe even the 1940s.

Anja Schüler: That is in order to prove that sort of democracy works, and its really the system that's superior to authoritarian system. So, it seemed to me a little bit that the president's words were directed at China, which you also see as a long-term threat. However, in your eyes, Russia presents a more acute threat to the U.S. and its European allies. Why is that?

John Deni: I discuss in the book really what does America hope for from its allies and its partners in Europe. And clearly, from Washington's perspective, China is what we call the pacing threat, that is the long-term challenge that we will face from Washington's perspective over the next couple of decades, most likely, but certainly over the next decade, which is really a time horizon for my book. It is seen in Washington as this long-term challenge, but not as an acute one in the way that Russia is. Let me talk about Russia briefly and then I'll come back to China. Russia is, of course, seen as a major challenge and a threat, which is a consistent view across most of Europe and most of NATO. It's seen as more acute insofar as it is actively fomenting instability in Northeastern Europe and elsewhere across Europe on a routine basis. It challenges our airspace, it conducts, no notice or very short notice, large scale exercises that to our eye appear in the same way as do preparations for an invasion. As we know, it is engaged in essentially an undeclared hybrid war across Europe, engaging in malicious cyberattacks. It has unleashed teams of assassins – it smacks of the Cold War – teams of assassins across Europe to take out political opponents. So, for all of these reasons – as well as the proximity, Russia is clearly the proximate threat relative to China when it comes to European security – Russia is viewed as the acute near-term threat. By the same token, I think many analysts in the United States believe that Russia is probably not a long-term challenge, a long-term threat. We believe that for a couple of reasons: It may be too strong to say that Russia is a declining power, but when you look at numerous indicators of national power, Russia is certainly not in the same boat as China. So, if we examine Russia's economy, it's relatively small, it's about the same size as Italy's. It is heavily reliant on resource extraction. Despite a decade or two of efforts by Putin to diversify, the economy remains dependent upon oil and, to a lesser extent, gas. Its military, although it has achieved some success in terms of reforms over the last decade or so, is still not as capable as Western militaries – it certainly is not nearly as large as it was in Cold War days or today not nearly as large relative to the accumulated NATO

military power. So, when you look at all these factors, as well as demographic factors and the ongoing brain drain that challenges Russia, I think there's a sense in the United States and probably across most of our allied capitals with, of course, some obvious exceptions, such as Poland or the Baltic states, that Russia is probably going to be declining as a threat over time. In contrast, China, as I mentioned, is the pacing threat, the long-term challenge; it's the size of that challenge that I think worries a lot of folks in Washington and is the reason why we are now doubling down in the Biden administration on partnerships and alliances. It's not simply the size of the Chinese economy, but also the manner in which China engages in the world. You're beginning to see that in Europe now – in terms of its predatory economic behavior, in terms of the diplomacy it's engaged in, its PPE or pandemic diplomacy – this paints a picture of a country, China, that is moving from being merely a partner and a rival to being a serious competitor and a major security challenge.

Anja Schüler: Although you could argue that Russia is engaging in a little pandemic diplomacy as well, and we'll have to see what comes of that. But let me sort of hark back to my first theme, that Democratic partners are so vital and maybe more vital than ever if democracy and the liberal international economic order is to survive and not to be superseded by authoritarian regimes. So, these democratic partners of the United States then would have to have the capacity, the capability, and the will to act, as you argue in your book, yet you entitled your book "The Coalition of the unWilling and the unAble". That does not sound too optimistic here.

John Deni: Now Anja, honestly, as I began the research for the book and as it unfolded as I wrote it, you know, it was frankly kind of depressing. I'm an optimistic person by nature, and I am a committed Atlanticist. I think the United States and its partners are stronger when we work together through venues like NATO. So, as I began to unpack how and whether our major allies in Europe – and I look at five of them, I look at the U.K., France, Germany, Italy, and Poland – I wanted to examine how and whether these countries would have the capacity, capability, and will to be by our side a decade from now – the late 2020s – as they have been over the last two decades. I really tried to examine this from the perspective of not simply military power, but the things that underpin that, that undergird it, and then by that, I mean primarily their economic power, but also their demographics. And, yeah, to be honest, it was a rather pessimistic picture that I uncovered. There are some silver linings, and we can get into that, yet not a very positive outlook for the coming years.

Anja Schüler: So, why don't you take us through that, maybe in more detail. Let's take a closer look at those allies that you just mentioned that you have looked at in your book. Indeed, we have seen some major changes, not the least because of Brexit and because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

John Deni: Yes, the most obvious cases, as you say, is Brexit. When I look at these five European allies of the United States, Brexit and its impact on the U.K. economy is the one that stands out most. But of course, the U.K. is not the only country going

through this sort of period of strategic change, as I term it in my book, but Brexit is the most obvious one. It was clear before the Brexit vote in 2016 – and it's become obvious since then, given the available data – that the U.K. withdrawal from the E.U. is going to have a negative impact on gross domestic product of the U.K., on household incomes, and on the quality of life. We've already seen that manifest itself in terms of the pound's exchange rate; the pound, of course, is down since the Brexit vote. From the American perspective, there's been no better time to go visit the U.K. because the dollar is stronger there than it's been in a generation or two. But this speaks to the decline in GDP that we've seen already unfold over the last five years, even before the agreement on the U.K.'s exit was finalized just a few months ago. That will have spillover effects into the defense budget. And what I did in the book was to look back and see how the U.K. responded to the last great decline in its GDP. That was, of course, in the wake of the sovereign debt crisis a decade ago. Like most of its European partners at that time, the U.K. sought to cut its defense budget in order to safeguard as much as it could its social welfare safety net. In my book, I go through the exercise of examining exactly how many billions of pounds this will mean in terms of a reduction of the U.K. defense budget over the next decade. We're already seeing some of that play out in terms of the latest Security Defense Review that's emerged from London in terms of a reduced strategic horizon for the U.K. I question the degree to which it will still be able to remain the right-hand partner of the U.S., certainly the military, but in in a broader context as well.

When I look at France, I see a similar story playing out to some degree. The French, like the U.K., have got a global ambition, they conceive of their interest in global terms, but they are increasingly bogged down in a sort of an economic situation they struggle to free themselves from. Macron promised in 2017 an economic revolution, and he brought about really a political revolution accompanying that; but he's not been able to make good yet on the promises of that economic rebirth. In contrast, the story of Germany over the last decade is one of nearly relentless economic rise, a slow but steady one. However, Germany has yet to turn that economic power into strong military power. It's clearly the economic and arguably the political hegemon in Europe, but not yet the military one. I think there is a very good chance, though, given polling data, that Germany is going to continue to evolve in its willingness and its ability to engage beyond Europe.

Anja Schüler: Due to our history, we've always been kind of hesitant to do that. Do you see a change there with a younger generation coming up?

John Deni: Exactly. The polling data shows that many Germans today still do not prefer a very dynamic or robust role for Germany in the world today. But if you disaggregate that polling data and look at it by age, you see there's a serious divide between older Germans, who very much oppose a more active Germany in the world, and younger Germans, who are very much in favor of a more active German role. And we can look back to recent history, for instance, if we contrast Germany of 1994, where it was reluctant to even send its crew members on NATO monitoring flights for

the no-fly zone over Bosnia, up to a decade later in 2004, when German forces were responsible for an entire region of Northern Afghanistan. What we see is real change in Germany occurring in that short time span.

Anja Schüler: To wrap this up, Italy and Poland have special problems as well.

John Deni: They do. Poland has really been the economic tiger of Europe, and it has, unlike Germany, ploughed that economic power into a modernized, rejuvenated military power. But it remains entirely focused on Russia as its primary threat for obvious reasons, and it's going to be very difficult for Washington to get the Poles to do much beyond Northeastern Europe. And then, when we look at Italy, we see a country that a decade and a half ago was very engaged across the world in terms of diplomacy and its military power, even economically. But Italy has been hit by what I call kind of a one-two punch. It suffered significantly in the sovereign debt crisis and then, of course, it was hit by the migrant crisis in the middle of the last decade. These two phenomena resulted in populists coming to power, which has only worsened. I call it sort of receding of Italy's strategic horizon, now focused largely on the Mediterranean littoral. Of course, Italy remains somewhat engaged in Afghanistan and in the Middle East, but it is drawing back on those deployments and is focused at home on domestic security and on the migrant challenge across the Mediterranean.

Anja Schüler: Italy and Poland have their own geopolitical predicaments then, if you will. So, let me go back to the title of your book one more time. When we talk about the coalition of the "unwilling," could part of the problem possibly also have originated on the other side of the Atlantic? Over the past four years, the Trump administration has done its share to raise serious doubts about whether Washington is willing and able to meet the security challenges of its European partners. So, which diplomatic or military policy tools will Washington employ to ensure that its European partners are still by its side ten years from now and are capable and willing?

John Deni: You're certainly correct that the Trump administration played a role here over the last four years in undermining the transatlantic relationship. But in all honesty, the U.S. policy toward Europe has really been a bifurcated one over the last four years. We have lots of evidence of – at the working level – our government working very closely with and reinforcing the efforts of our European partners. I'm thinking specifically of the number of troops deployed to Europe which actually increased during Donald Trump's administration. Now, he did announce, of course, just months prior to the election he was going to downsize presence in Germany. That was viewed on both sides of the Atlantic as just an election ploy, not a serious plan and, of course, the Biden administration has put that entirely on ice. So, while at the working level there was good cooperation, at the presidential level, Trump did all he could to undermine the relationship, calling the E.U. a foe, threatening at one point, in fact, to withdraw from NATO. These things were not very helpful. But when Europeans ask me about whether and how they can count on the U.S. and they look ahead to 2024 and think, oh, there's another election, we get another Trump, I rely on

the polling data in my own country, as well as the political sentiment in our Congress. I point to bipartisan vote, strong Republican majorities, in fact, favoring membership in NATO, when in fact it was a Republican led Congress in 2018 that put into law a bill that would prohibit the use of any U.S. government funds for the withdrawal of NATO. Republicans were very concerned about Trump doing this. If you look at polling data in our country, across all age groups, across both political parties, strong majorities in our country continue to favor either a maintenance of our relationship with NATO, or an increase in that relationship. Strong majorities also continue to favor shared leadership between the United States and its allies and partners. So, I think these things speak to the enduring commitment that you see on the part of the United States: broad majorities left and right, young and old, in our commitment to Europe and the transatlantic relationship.

Anja Schüler: Let me ask you one final question: Overall, is yours a story of renewal or decline?

John Deni: That is a good question. In the book, I end with a rather lengthy chapter on what Washington can do to mitigate the downsides, the more pessimistic elements of this tale that I tell unfolding over the next decade and instead accentuate the silver linings. So, there are a list, there's over a dozen policy recommendations that I make for Washington policymakers in the areas of politics, economics, military affairs, et cetera, in which we can try to reinforce the transatlantic link, strengthen the ability and ultimately the willpower of our European allies to partner with us, as we seek to address these common challenges Russia, China, pandemics, climate change, terrorism and political instability to the South and Southeast. These are things that we need to work on together. And so, I try to end on a more optimistic note that while Washington doesn't hold all the cards, it does indeed have some policies it can try to leverage, to work with European partners, many of whom at this point want to partner with the United States in addressing these issues. In the end, I must say that while a lot of the research was rather pessimistic, I try to end on an optimistic note and a hopeful one as we look to the rest of this decade…

Anja Schüler: … and maybe to rebuild trust, send some of that surplus vaccine over. Thank you so much, John Deni, for these insights. You have been listening to the HCA podcast and I have been talking to John Deni about his new book "The Coalition of the unWilling and unable," which I found very thought-provoking and a good read. I can recommend to anybody interested in the future of American geopolitics. Thanks for joining us, John. We hope that we will be able to welcome you back to Heidelberg in the not-too-distant future.

John Deni: Vielen Dank, Anja.

Anja Schüler: My name is Anja Schüler and my team, and I would like to thank you for tuning in today. The podcast will be back in two weeks when Martin Thunert will talk to Thomas Peuntner of the John Deere Corporation about labor relations in

Germany and the United States. We certainly look forward to welcoming you back, so stay tuned and please stay healthy.