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THE CURRENT

“How anti-corruption efforts strengthen global democracy and security”

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DEWS: You’re listening to *The Current*, produced by the Brookings Podcast Network. I’m your host, Fred Dews.

This month marks the second anniversary of the first ever U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption, released by the Biden administration, which identifies corruption as a national security threat. This fall also marks the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, which the UN calls the only legally binding universal anti-corruption instrument.

To talk about anti-corruption and Brookings’s work to tackle the world’s thorniest anti-corruption problems, I’m joined by Ambassador Norm Eisen, senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and chair of the Anti-Corruption, Democracy, and Security Project at Brookings, ACDS for short.

Norm, welcome back to *The Current*.

EISEN: Fred, it’s always a pleasure to be with you and *The Current’s* Large Listening audience.

DEWS: Thank you. Norm, you’ve spent decades advancing rule of law and good governance in government with various organizations and projects, not only here at

Brookings, but also in the Obama administration. Norm, how did you get started in the anti-corruption and ethics space?

EISEN: Well, when I was a practicing attorney, I was often involved in cases that featured allegations of corruption. And my experience working those cases, financial corruption, political corruption, led me to found what is now one of our preeminent U.S. anti-corruption groups, CREW, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. And as a result of all that, my law school friend, Barack Obama, invited me to work on these issues as an advisor to his campaign and then as his ethics czar.

So, my remit: I was the first and last ever ethics czar in a White House. And my remit was to build an administration that was free of corruption. And President Obama writes about this in his memoir of his administration. Together, we did that.

And as part of looking at how to have a democratic enterprise that is corruption free, I think we accomplished the most ethical administration in modern American history if you measure by how many people were investigated, prosecuted, charged, convicted, the answer is zero during the eight years of the Obama administration.

The principles that we utilized—I did a lot of research—and in the years since, I've been studying how those principles do and do not work and applying them globally to democracies and the problem of corruption. Ergo, our project ACDS, Anti-Corruption, Democracy, and Security. That's how I got from point A to point B, Fred.

DEWS: Right, so it's definitely a straight line from your earlier work with the Obama administration to the ACDS project. So, talk a little bit more then about why you launched the Anti-Corruption, Democracy, and Security Project in particular.

EISEN: As I worked on this model of how to insulate a government from corruption that we piloted with good success in the Obama administration, it's become clear to me over the years that there's a tight connection between the issue of having integrity in governance with the health of democracy and with the security of democracy and questions of international security.

And we see, for example, how these three elements of democracy, anti-corruption, and security are all at play in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, because the Russian regime led by Putin has assaulted a democracy, funded itself through accumulating corruption over decades, and done so in a way that is inimical not only to the security of Ukraine, but to the transatlantic relationship and the world.

You could say something similar in the other conflict that is gripping us and jeopardizing security: the Hamas aggression against Israel, where Hamas is accused of engaging in corruption to fund their activities. The heinous assault of October 7th is one against our democratic ally. And it has had a security effect, not only on Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship, but broader security ramifications.

So, the two conflicts that are consuming us now are ones that involve anti-corruption, democracy, and security. And that is the nexus that we study in ACDS.

I should add, by the way, that we've been very critical of the current regime led by Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, in fact, have published on some of the corrupt aspects. And in my view, his neglect of security interests in favor of his frustrating his own personal investigation that he's undergone for his corruption and that undermined the security of Israel.

So, there's no ... there's no monopoly anywhere. Similarly, looking at the Ukraine conflict, there has been a continuing struggle with corruption within Ukraine, which I think President Zelensky and his government have dealt with well. So, those are two examples of the nexus that we study in ACDS.

DEWS: Well then looking at the other side of the coin, Norm, are there areas where you're seeing progress around the world in terms of anti-corruption efforts?

EISEN: Amazing progress. The Biden administration has for the first time recognized corruption and the fight against corruption as a pillar of its foreign policy. So, it was one of the three areas of emphasis in the Democracy Summit process that the Biden administration launched, and really is a signal part of how Biden sees the world. And our allied governments feel the same way about the importance of focusing on anti-corruption.

And in ACDS, you know, where we work with countries all over the world in studying this nexus—democracy, anti-corruption, and security—how each can reinforce the other, we're really seeing an important global emphasis.

And once again, if you look at the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as countries are thinking about how they support Ukraine, one of the main things they are saying is, hey, we want to make sure you're dealing effectively with the challenge of corruption. For example, if we're gonna put hundreds of billions of dollars of reconstruction funds into Ukraine, we wanna make sure that they're not being diverted for corrupt purposes. Ukraine is really innovating—we've written a lot about that—to meet that standard. So, we see the fight against corruption as being a globally well-understood priority and real steps forward.

Another example: the dozens and dozens of commitments that we analyze and catalog here at Brookings that were made in the Democracy Summit process. We also are a co-chair of the anti-corruption cohort that continues, civil society working with government as part of the Democracy Summit process as we get ready for the next, the Third Summit on Democracy, which will be held in South Korea next year.

You see countries who are making concrete commitments that they're gonna do better. So, we are seeing progress. Of course, there's a tremendous amount that remains to be done.

DEWS: So, staying on Ukraine for a moment, the ACDS project has seven focus areas. Ukraine is the only country specifically mentioned. I can understand why based on a lot of what you've already said. But a lot of people in the US, a lot of people on the U.S. side are critical of funding or supporting Ukraine's resistance to Russia. Some people call it a waste of American taxpayer dollars. They cite what they see as corruption in Ukraine. How do you, how does the ACDS project

demonstrate that one, anti-corruption efforts in Ukraine are vital, and two, that they're working?

EISEN: We have done the analysis and we think the evidence is clear. Number one, that the conflict in Ukraine is essential to American democracy, because you have an adversary of the United States and an autocratic power, Russia, that is pushing back on the democratic advancement of a U.S. ally and a part of the community of democracies that we lead around the world. And of course, that's Ukraine.

So, when we're supporting Ukraine, we're really supporting the global alliance of democracies against an autocratic adversary, sending a message that in other places where we have strong interests that America can be relied upon.

That makes the coalition that we lead work, and not just for democracy, but also as a security matter. If Russia can get away with their aggression with Ukraine, they're not going to stop there. They're going to keep pushing forward. And, and that is a danger to NATO, a danger to the EU, and to the security interests of the United States.

And finally, this is why we named Ukraine as one of the key areas of focus for us. We want to reassure people that when America and our allies invest in Ukraine, it turns out that Ukraine has a very robust plan to make sure the money is well spent and not diverted by way of corruption. So, there's strong policy there.

I think when folks pay attention to that evidence, whether it's in Congress, among the American people, they see that supporting Ukraine makes sense from the perspective of American democracy and our leadership in democracy from the perspective of American security; and our security leadership; and from an anti-corruption perspective, including because some of these ideas that are being developed in Ukraine can be utilized elsewhere around the world to continue this fight against corruption and all of the evils that it brings with it across the planet.

DEWS: So, I want to make sure I underscore the emphasis of the project for our listeners. And as I understand it, you're working with allies and like-minded partners around the world to focus on anti-corruption efforts as a bulwark against corruption. You're not necessarily thinking you're not going to change the Russian government's corrupt practices. You're not going to change Hamas, but you're going to shore up allies and partners to defend against those.

EISEN: That's right, but some of the anti-corruption work that is undertaken by governments, by civil society, the press has a very important role in exposing corruption. So, some of the anti-corruption work that is undertaken can constrain the Russian oligarchs, including the oligarch-in-chief, or the Hamas oligarchs, who are said to have amassed vast fortunes in operating that terrorist outfit.

So, for example, we do a lot of work on the role of enablers in the West where you have professionals, whether it's lawyers, accountants, real estate brokers, who take advantage of loopholes, including loopholes in the United States where some of our jurisdictions like Delaware are far too easy to set up anonymous corporations in Delaware where you can hide assets.

So, if you deal with enablers, you're able to constrain—and not just in the United States, but around the world—if you can establish best practices, including in jurisdictions in Europe where it's where it's no secret that London is a favored destination of Russian oligarch investment, including real estate investment. Well, if we can get the UK to be part of this movement to reform anti-corruption laws, to bring them into the 21st century, including best practices for enablers so they're asking about where the money is coming from, or having beneficial ownership transparency—the rest of the best practices that help fight corruption—that does have an impact on the global bad actors who are using corrupt funds to attack democracy and security.

So, the analysis, the research, the best practices, I think can not only help our allies to be stronger but can have knock-on effects that land on the, ultimately on the wallet of a Putin or of a Hamas and the concentric circles around those corrupt leaders.

DEWS: Norm, just this week, the ACDS project convened an expert discussion on anti-corruption progress and priorities. Can you talk a little bit about that event?

EISEN: Yes, we benefit from the really the unparalleled reputation and reach of Brookings—I'm proud to say year after year, the number one think tank in the United States and globally—to bring together policymakers from the United States government at senior levels from around the world; experts, including our own wonderful ACDS Brookings crew—John Katz and Robin Lewis, who together with me manage the program; representatives of civil society from the U.S. and around the globe to have a series of conversations on how can we galvanize the progress that has been made? How can we continue to drive forward? What does the evidence teach us? And what are the best practices, and what is the research agenda to continue learning and implementing anti-corruption measures as a way to drive the advancement of American democracy and American security, but also that of our allies.

We have countries from all over the world who participate with civil society, from all over the world, and business and media in building this coalition to advance integrity here at home and around the globe. And they all came together for a wonderful day at Brookings. If you missed it, just check out the ACDS page here on the Brookings website. You'll find a full record of all the proceedings and you can sign up to get information about ACDS and to come to future events.

DEWS: And conveniently that website is Brookings dot edu slash ACDS. So, I encourage listeners to check it out.

Norm, final question for you. Also a multi-stakeholder event about to convene here in the United States. The U.S. government is hosting in Atlanta, Georgia, the 10th session of the Conference of the State Parties to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption. What will be the main priorities at that convening?

EISEN: Our ACDS program will be well represented at the gathering in Atlanta, where the world will really come together—the signatories to the UNCAC, the UN Convention Against Corruption. The goal will be a lot like our ACDS convening, but on an even larger scale that we're very proud to be a part of, just as ACDS plays an important role in the Democracy Summit process.

The goal will be to study the progress of the Convention Against Corruption on its anniversary, to look forward to the years and the decades to come, how we can continue to drive forward. To meet with the state parties, but also big representation from civil society, business, global press will be very well represented, their role in uncovering corruption.

What can we do better? What worked? What hasn't worked over these many years of UNCAC? And what can everybody who cares about this, whether like Brookings, you're doing research and analysis and convening, governments driving forward—like I did under Obama as his ethics czar, to say, we're not gonna have any corruption. That goal of zero tolerance, is that possible? What can we get done in every dimension this year and in the years to come?

And as the largest gathering, multi-stakeholder convening of its kind—there are other important ones, including the conferences that Transparency International does on a regular basis—but but as this unique convening around the UN Convention Against Corruption, where do we go from here and how do we hold ourselves accountable?

So, it's a big agenda, it's an ambitious agenda. Brookings and ACDS are very proud to be a part of it. If you're coming, look us up. We'll be having a panel of our own, which you'll find in the conference agenda. And I'm very eager to chart that course for the years to come to make even more progress in the fight against corruption.

DEWS: Once again, you can learn more about the Anti-Corruption, Democracy, and Security Project and its important work on our website, Brookings dot edu slash ACDS. Norm, as always, it's a delight to speak with you on any topic and I thank you for your time today.

EISEN: Fred, we so often talk about questions of U.S. domestic political corruption and events, but one of the wonderful things about Brookings is that we do work all over the world. So, thanks for having me on to talk about the Anti-Corruption, Democracy, and Security program. And I look forward to being back with you and all your listeners soon.