

Wolfgang Ischinger on transatlantic relations

INTERVIEW BY JULIANE SCHÄUBLE

“The entire foundation of free trade is eroding.”



About former Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger

Wolfgang Ischinger's long diplomatic career began in 1973 at the United Nations Secretariat in New York. From 2001 to 2006, he was the German ambassador to the US, and from 2006 to 2008 to the UK. In 2008, he took over the chairmanship of the Munich Security Conference on the initiative of the German government. In addition to his work as senior professor for security policy and diplomatic practice at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, Ischinger advises governments, international organizations and companies on political and strategic issues.

You just received the Transatlantic Partnership Award from AmCham Germany. What would you say are three key points about why transatlantic relations are the most important in the world?

The transatlantic relationship lies at the core of what we in the West regard as a community of shared values. In addition, Germany renounced nuclear weapons in the Cold War and is therefore incapable of protecting itself in a world where nuclear weapons could potentially play a role. That's why we must rely on an alliance or a protective arrangement. The US has provided this in the form of the NATO partnership. I don't see any indication we can now dispense with this protection. As a third point, no bilateral relationship has such strong economic ties as the one between Germany and the US. This is more than just a matter of trade. Mutual investments are even more important. We've created around 700,000 jobs in the US and vice versa.

And yet President Trump is threatening to impose punitive tariffs that could critically impact German industry.

A step that doesn't bode well for global trade policy. The entire foundation of free trade is eroding. There's great concern we'll slide into a no-win situation with our eyes wide open. But this isn't the first time transatlantic trade policy has faced conflicts. The '60s also saw a chicken war, the predecessor to the chlorine chicken dispute. By the way: Had we been able to conclude TTIP in the Obama era, we'd now have a secure agreement that'd be much harder for Trump to break.

Protectionism would also harm the US economy. Doesn't that concern Trump?

It all depends on if counter measures are taken. If each iPhone or Microsoft product is taxed with an additional 30% tariff, then the powerful companies will have to send their lobbyists to Washington, DC.

Should the EU threaten with counter measures?

Threatening is always wrong, especially if you're not sure whether or not you'll follow through with the threat. But you should clearly demonstrate that you're willing to respond with pressure to defend the global free-trade system. The decisive factor is how exactly the tariffs look. Are they universal or aimed at specific countries and industries? The goal of our policy must be to conduct negotiations to preferably prevent such steps.

Time and again we've heard we shouldn't take everything that Trump says or tweets so literally. Do we have to learn to look away?

In certain areas, it would be a mistake not to take Donald Trump and his tweets seriously. For many years, Trump has thought that the American trade policy does more harm than good for the country. Just as he's contended for a long time that America is being robbed by NATO allies that don't invest enough money into their own defense. He does have a point about that. We should take him seriously, but not overreact. And some of his announcements have in the end been less drastically implemented than feared.



Juliane Schäuble

The interview was conducted on March 5 by Juliane Schäuble, who oversees politics at Berlin's Der Tagesspiegel. She can be contacted at presse@amcham.de.

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