Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Thomas G. Weiss is a distinguished scholar of international relations and global governance with special expertise in the politics of the United Nations. Since 1998, he has been a Presidential Professor at The Graduate Center as a member of the Political Science Faculty, and is also the Director Emeritus of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies. Weiss is one of the leading experts on the theory and practice of humanitarian intervention and is recognized as an authority on international organizations and the United Nations system. As the UN prepares to celebrate its 75th anniversary on October 24th, albeit during a global pandemic, it faces perhaps its greatest challenge since its inception against a backdrop of growing global illiberalism that is hostile toward multilateral organizations.

Weiss joins The Thought Project podcast to discuss the UN and the US presidential elections that are less than three weeks away. Welcome to The Thought Project Professor Thomas Weiss.

Thomas Weiss: It's nice to be here, Tanya.

Tanya Domi: It's good to talk to you today in the morning. I've been wanting to get you on for a long time. It has been written in the UN Charter, it has four purposes, to maintain worldwide peace and security, develop relations among nations, foster cooperation between nations in order to solve economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian international problems. As a scholar who has studied the UN for many years, what is your report card 75 years after it was conceived and established?

Thomas Weiss: This is a tough question. I've written a book, as you know, Tanya, Would the World be Better Without the UN? And I selected the title because I thought it might mislead a few people at the Heritage Foundation and they'd buy it and help my retirement account. But the answer is on page 190. No, the world wouldn't be better without the United Nations. The problem with answering the question in a black or white order, is that there have been a huge number of things, under-appreciated successes, that don't get much publicity. There've also been a huge number of less than successful, so we would say total failures, that get lots of it. So I wrote this book in order to tell some fun, gold or underappreciated stories. So that's part one, part two of the book however, is to say, listen, you can't just be a cheerleader. With the sustainable development and international cooperation, there are a whole lot of things that could have been a whole lot better.
The part one of the book relates to the story that are, in my view, of success. And the second part of the book on those kinds of errors that could have been avoided and could be avoided in the future. So a grade, we would have some grade inflation, so why don't we say a B plus as it was the whole days that would've said a B minus. We can't really do without it, there are a whole lot of things that could be improved. And in fact, one of the dangers I see at the present moment, is that the organization could slide into oblivion. That is institutions rarely disappear, but they become less key to solving world problems-

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: in this case.

Tanya Domi: Right, right. I do agree with you about, the world would not the better without the UN. I say, well, what do you do if you eliminate the UN? Who's going to step up to those challenges? And so I do agree with you and you're right about the question of, are they going to be relevant?

My second question is, isn't the UN really facing and contending with the existential crisis, a threat to its existence and purpose in a world that is growing more illiberal from India to the Russian Federation. Most prominently, the United States joining in that illiberal trend with every passing day. Perhaps this is also exacerbated by a global pandemic too. So what are your comments about that? And I’m sure that the UN straining, because not all member States are willing to pay or have less money, less funds to pay their dues right now.

Thomas Weiss: This is a... I guess I've seen in my analysis of behavior, misbehavior of international organizations, I've seen numerous crises. I think the current moment really is very, very acute because, as you mentioned, it's the age of Trump but it's also the age of [Patna] and [Shea] and [Parolin] and Modi and [Verite] and [crosstalk] [Kabalt], everywhere. The first opening day of the General Assembly, like everything else these days, was filled with speeches from these very people, Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, et cetera. They were not talking about the crucial importance of the United Nations except for tea, because China is able to take advantage of the United States to push it's own agenda. So the most supportive rhetorical remarks came from our president, but in the midst of this new populism, new nationalism, you have an organization that is on the edges, not only that the States were thrown several contributions, as you mentioned, the pandemic makes most nations no longer in a position to pick up any tab that the United States is not picking up.

So the organization is a real financial pinch. More than that however, I see the threat coming from the fact that we have two huge problems, the pandemic itself, let alone the 10% drop in global GDP, resulting from the pandemic, in this country, as well as lots of others, it's suffering immensely from this. And, I need to stand on my head to say, Hey, isn't international cooperation a sensible
approach to this? So at the very time, you're dealing with two gigantic existential threats. The obvious argument about greater collaboration does not necessarily sell very well. What is intriguing for me, and I say this while spending part of my time for Chicago Council on Global Affairs, a annual survey, which is kind of authority on US attitudes or US public opinion toward the American foreign policy issues. Almost two-thirds of the respondents on a sample of 10,000 people across the country, almost two-thirds, basically say that's fantastic, and climate change.

Both of which are quite real and both of which have an impact on everyone’s daily lives. Two-thirds of people saying we need better international cooperation. We have to rely on Multilateral Institutions more. Now, obviously, the two-thirds figure’s actually exceed 64%, that is now even higher because it’s only 40% of Republicans-

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: -that take the simple approach. So within the population, as a whole, we have an underlying basis of support for more collaboration, but our country is actually moving in the opposite direction and it's not merely the United Nations’, 75th anniversary, but every other form of multilateral collaboration [crosstalk] will all end up obsolete.

Tanya Domi: Sure, yes.

Thomas Weiss: Well, definitely, my course of the minimum requirement for a multilateral effort would be three. And even the arrangement, the Free Trade Arrangement with Canada and Mexico, we can't even do that. We have to have two sets of bilateral negotiations, so even the minimal requirement for international cooperation with our neighbors as you come to a bilateral negotiation. So this is a terrible moment for the country run by an administration that seems to have forgotten the origins of this experiment, in the myths of World War two and the establishment, actually even before the end of World War two.

Tanya Domi: Absolutely. And I would... As you point out the UN isn't the only multilateral organization we're talking about in this anniversary time, post World War two, Atlantic security cooperation through NATO, and you've mentioned some other organizations like the World Bank. There's so many organizations right now that are being battered by illiberal leaders who say they want to go it alone or they'll cut their own partnerships outside of the UN. And at this point I would just like to ask you, if you look at Trump, in relationship to the UN, compared to past leaders, and it’s not the first time that we've pulled out of The Human Rights Council, and it's not the first time that we pulled out of UNESCO, but you and other people who observe this quite well, not only did he do that, but he also pulled us out of the Paris Agreement Accords on climate change. And he also halted all funding for Palestinian refugees and also cut funding to the UN
Population Fund. How do you rank him as a US President relationship to the UN, compared to the past 44 presidents?

Thomas Weiss: Not all 44 were [inaudible] in the UN.

Tanya Domi: Well that's true. That's true.

Thomas Weiss: Any of those... [crosstalk]

Tanya Domi: Going back to Wilson, Wilson started [crosstalk] the effort...

Thomas Weiss: He is the most hostile toward the notion of international collaboration in what ever form.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: The epitome of this illustration, I think, is cutting off your nose to spite your face, is when you didn't mention which is the World Health Organization.

Tanya Domi: True. True.

Thomas Weiss: In the midst of a pandemic that threatens, pulling out a year from now, you have to think, well, how do you stop a pandemic? Do you build a wall? Of course not. There's no way to protect a country by building walls around a pandemic. It requires better information. It's going to require a vaccine worldwide-

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: And this is not going to happen because the United States beats at it's chest and says, make America right again.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: We're just moving in the opposite direction and it's one of the reasons, no surprise here, that we actually have to change this administration and Biden administration will have a fuse, for a thing in it's Inbox. It'll have to wait many priorities. However, for me, and I think it's not just me, somewhere for the top of that pile in the Inbox, must be improving Washington's dismal image worldwide, repairing the fabric of relations with our allies-

Tanya Domi: Absolutely, yeah.

Thomas Weiss: -and we are [drinking] with the multi linear system that the US created 75 years ago and from which we, and the rest of the planet, have actually benefited.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. So the most recent Pew poll, on how the US is viewed, is very damning, I mean, it's perhaps the lowest approval of the United States, at least in my
lifetime, very, very disturbing to see. But clearly anybody that follows foreign policy looks at America and its place in the world would anticipate though, our standing is dropped considerably. Now it's been written about your work that you have said that there is space, if we elect a new administration on November third, to recover. Let's talk about the possibility of a reelection by Trump. What do you think the upshot of that is when it comes to global affairs and the US position in the world?

Thomas Weiss: Well, timelines, social scientists are not paid to make projections, but digital prospect is I think about 2021, because all of the terrible decisions related to inner governmental institutions that have been made would not be reversed. Whether that's the Human Rights Council, whether it's UNESCO-

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: -whether it's UNFPA. But there are two problems that we started up, namely the withdrawal from the Paris Accords-

Tanya Domi: Right. Right.

Thomas Weiss: -which is legally going to occur the day after the elections-

Tanya Domi: Right. Right.

Thomas Weiss: -and the withdrawal from the World Health Organization, which would occurred next summer. So things could actually get worse. Also, the times of agreements we've torn up that could be pieced back together, modification of the transpacific partnership in Asia instead of handing the terrain to China, we can make in roads back there. The efforts to make the World Trade Organization what it was supposed to be instead of falling apart, because the United States has refused to elect the commissioners who make decisions so the organization is close to being paralyzed right now.

So it seems to me that the difference between the third of November-

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: between a Trump continuation and a Biden transition, is just enormous because several things, our allies in NATO would be reassured. We get set that craziness off the table. We would be back in the Paris Agreement. I think he said that would be, then I say, what's wrong from the World Health Organization would be off the table next year for the elections. I'm sure the United States would be back in the Human Rights Council.

Tanya Domi: Right.
Thomas Weiss: This small thing called the Iran deal, I believe, would be back at least on the negotiating table and probably back and more or less the way it was originally negotiated. So it seems to me the difference between the fourth or whatever they had laid in November, between a Trump continuation and a Biden presidency is gigantic in numerous ways. We haven't talked about what happens inside the country [crosstalk] in terms of US Foreign Policy and US Foreign Relations, it's gigantic.

Tanya Domi: So I share your view. You have espoused this is a little scholarly, but I want to talk to you about the idea of a third UN integrated with the policy of responsibility to protect, also known among those of us who follow R2P2. Has this approach, and when you're talking about international cooperation, has this approach really been effective?

When we look at let's take, for instance, the Syrian War, there has been such an... I feel, very complex at the same time in recent years, less and less cooperation. And Trump really ceded to Russia in Syria. You know, he pulled out at one point and gave Russia footprint in the Middle East for the first time since 1973. So can you explain to me how the UN has worked in this context and has R2P2 even been attempted in this situation?

Thomas Weiss: The responsibility for such, is a norm. It's an emerging norm [crosstalk] harvestable-

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Thomas Weiss: ... suggests that mass murder, war crimes, [crosstalk] genocides, are not good to have as policy options. So we haven't set the bar very high in terms of acting. I mean, we're not talking about run of the bill, [sciences] variety, human rights abuse. We're talking about mass atrocity.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: So in that context, the notion has emerged starting with the coming to the rescue of the curves in Northern Iraq, after the Persian Gulf War and continuing successfully in a couple of cases of... In terms of saving human life in Somalia, in Kosovo. [Crosstalk] And in terms of what didn't work, both the Vulcan and Rwanda. And certainly if we fast forward, we're in Syria.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: So the principle here is, that if a country is unable to protect its own citizens, or is manifestly unwilling to protect its own citizens, there's a responsibility of the international community of States to come to the rescue.

Tanya Domi: Sure?
Thomas Weiss: Yes. Principle, like many principles of international relations, is oftentimes best respected in the breach, but on occasion it has made a difference. I oftentimes say how the criticism is made. I certainly have admitted, and admitted at the time, the lack of action in Syria. Why should one react in Libya? Why not in Syria when in fact the human toll was much greater in Syria? We have a double standard. And for me, a double standard is better than a single standard. If a single standard is do nothing, ever, which is the old rule on occasionally now we say never again and mean it. Not always...

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: ...but occasionally we act.

Tanya Domi: I think it is... I take your points. I agree with them, but it's really, really difficult to be able to absorb over 500,000 dead and counting. It's a tragedy, a real tragedy that this war continues with very little public attention to it because it's just too dangerous to be there as reporters, as you probably know quite well.

Thomas Weiss: Oh yeah.

Tanya Domi: But the emerging norm is a good norm. We just have to hope to bolster the UN efforts on this. Maybe with a Biden administration we can turn to that. And then speaking of a potential Biden administration, you have been very active in publicly addressing the upcoming US elections, which are less than three weeks away. You organized an open letter signed by present and past International Studies Association presidents. and you also, co-authored an opinion editorial that was published in The Hill.com this past week. And as I said to you earlier, Tom, in my eight years at The Graduate center, I have really never seen you weigh in this aggressively on US domestic related issues. So what's up and why is this election so important to you and to all of us who care about the United States?

Thomas Weiss: Well, we started off by indicating that the number of international problems perpendicular to the pandemic...

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thomas Weiss: ...state of the global economy...

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Thomas Weiss: ...California burning and Louisiana underwater. [crosstalk] So I feel compelled in a way that I haven't in the past, and previous onslaught by the US administrations in the middle of the 1970s, a huge budgetary crisis, which was related to the passage of a restaurant who stood on Zionism racism levels. Pretty low moment for the United States and the UN/US relations. We've seen other moments of crisis, but I've never seen one like this in which the main
funder, the most important political layer is missing in action. And not only missing an action, it's creating havoc, the kind of havoc that only a major power can exercise in an inter-governmental organization. So merely in terms of the institutions that I've spent my life studying and trying to improve, I feel compelled.

But if you add to that, what's going on domestically, you have a perfect storm for sleepless nights, for something like them. The anxiety related to the combination of destroying the fabric of the country that I grew up in and care about deeply is one thing and the change of values that are in evidence, including an attack. Maybe political sciences are not totally evidence-based, but we like to think that facts have actually made a difference in the way people think, [crosstalk] and this administration pays no attention to scientific evidence or data of any kind. So in terms of the thing I study, it's under threat. In terms of the country, in which I live in, my grandkids are growing up, I think it is tottering. And in terms of the way I feel about values, it's unprecedented during the height of the Vietnam War, when I was engaged, because I thought it was a tragedy and a mistake in US foreign policy.

But I wasn't feeling that every single pillar of the society in which I live was under threat and that I disagreed with my parents over the war, but we didn't disagree on everything else and this time, in terms of what is going on in Washington, I've disagreed with LBJ, but not about civil rights and not about the Supreme Court and not about immigrants and not about voting rights. The war this time, it's really a Zed on every single issue. I am in total disagreement with the stated positions of the administration. And therefore I feel propelled in a way, I guess I've always been politically active, but this time, whether it's writing postcards, writing letters, sending money, trying to write often, it's not talking to my brother, it's really just too much thorough.

Tanya Domi: Indeed. I share your concerns. It's a common conversation to have with friends, how little sleep we have been having. It's a very difficult and challenging time, but it's a credit to you, Professor Weiss, all the work that you have done, scholarly work, mentoring students teaching on the United Nations and, and Foreign Affairs. And it's good to have you weigh in so strongly on a domestic situation that is absolutely unrecognizable to so many of us. So on that sobering note, we urge everyone to go out and vote. And I thank you so much for being with us today.

Thomas Weiss: My pleasure, Tanya.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Presidential Professor Thomas G Weiss, of The Graduate Center, CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.