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## Going global: Trust research and international relations

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# Going Global: Trust research and international relations

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## Abstract

In this review article we explore the growing body of literature on the subject of trust in the field of international relations. We argue that the international level represents a unique challenge for trust research. This is so because some of the most pressing problems facing the world today require the development of trusting relationships internationally. In addition, the international environment is structurally different from domestic or personal relations on which much of the trust literature has focused so far. We identify three main strands of trust literature in international relations – rationalist, social and psychological. We not only note the contributions these have made to understanding the role of trust internationally, but also highlight areas where more research is needed. Particularly, we argue that this includes theorising processes of trust-building, the identification of trusting relationships and the development of a normative case for trust among states.

## Introduction

The international level presents the greatest challenge to trust studies. The most pressing problems facing humanity, be they climate change, environmental degradation, or nuclear proliferation with the concomitant threat of a nuclear war cannot be solved within the confines of individual nation-states and demand international cooperation. These problems fundamentally foreground the existence of trust and distrust among states, the ways in which trust can facilitate or hinder states' encounters, and the possibility of establishing and maintaining trusting relationships among large collectives. It is of crucial importance to understand the role of trust in these dynamics from both theoretical and practical points of view. In short, a strong case exists for why the emerging field of trust studies should take a substantial interest in international relations and, vice versa, why the field of international relations ought to incorporate and develop insights generated by trust researchers.

Even a cursory look at the bilateral or multilateral relationships between states reveals a range of statements by world leaders concerning both trust and distrust. These suggest that they are aware of the significance of trust in solving these major problems, yet also understand its risks. For instance, prior to the Copenhagen climate change summit in 2009, the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon spoke about the need 'to build trust between developing and industrialized countries' (Ban, 2009). Shortly after his election in June 2013,

the Iranian president Hassan Rouhani spoke about the 'many ways to build trust' with the West ("Rouhani vows to 'build trust' with West," 2013). And yet, even before the tentative deal concerning the limits on the Iranian nuclear research was reached in November 2013, the US Secretary of State John Kerry went out of his way to stress that 'nothing we do [with Iran] is going to be based on trust.' (Steinhauer, 2013)

In addition to these appeals, we can observe formal or informal declarations of trusting relationships between specific states, or, on the contrary, denunciations of other states as untrustworthy. We can also find instances where states routinely cooperate with each other to the benefit of all concerned, but at the same time harbour distrust over whether other states involved might engage in free-riding or even defect from the agreement. Though almost all states maintain active militaries to repel external threat, suggesting a general degree of distrust of at least some states, we can simultaneously identify groups of states among whom trust is so high and trusting relationships so robust that war between them has become unthinkable.<sup>1</sup> All this reinforces our claim that the dynamics of trust and distrust play an important role in how states relate to and interact with each other.

Despite this, the subject of trust within the study of international relations, both theoretically and empirically, is still at a nascent, if rapidly developing, stage. With rare exceptions, until about a decade ago the international relations scholarship by and large overlooked trust as an explanatory factor in the relations between states. Likewise, trusting relationships rarely feature as something to be explained, irrespective of the numerous calls from practitioners regarding the importance of trust-building. Some scholars, such as John Mearsheimer, argue that this oversight is purposeful, claiming that there is 'little room for trust among states because a state may be unable to recover if its trust is betrayed.' (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 12) This is allegedly due to the unique characteristics of the international system, which makes the establishment and sustenance of trusting relationships between states much more difficult than between persons or organisations acting within the domestic sphere. Nonetheless, even Mearsheimer's sceptical assessment does not completely rule out the possibility of trust among states. It merely implies that it is rarely present.

Increasingly, scholars in the field of international relations have come to pay greater attention to the concept of trust and the role it might play in interstate affairs. Authors have found inspiration in various strands of the literature produced by trust researchers and have sought to apply it to a range of phenomena in international politics. Therefore, one goal of this review essay is to provide a thorough and critical overview of this growing literature. The flow in this exchange of ideas has, so far, been rather unidirectional from trust studies to international relations. We believe that drawing the focus of trust researchers to the international level will generate two-way traffic. Thus, another objective of this article is to highlight and explore the particular challenges and barriers posed to trust and trusting relationships by the structure of the international system. In this way, we want to encourage trust researchers to think further about the scope of applicability of their conceptual and

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<sup>1</sup> A group of states among whom warfare becomes unthinkable is known as a security community (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Booth & Wheeler, 2008; K. W. Deutsch et al., 1957).

theoretical tools. Finally, our third aim is to suggest some possible directions for future research at the intersection between trust studies and international relations.

The review essay reflects our objectives and proceeds in three parts. In the first part, we explain why trust has so long been ignored within international relations theory and why the international level poses unique challenges to the study of trust and trusting relations. In particular, we examine the *problem of anarchy* within the international system, which has led many to conclude, or perhaps outright assume, that trusting relations are impossible in international politics. Second, we show how scholars have attempted to introduce the concept of trust into the study of international relations, a trend that has recently picked up in pace dramatically. We trace diverse conceptual sources in trust research and highlight strengths and weaknesses of various applications to the study of international politics. The third section articulates several questions concerning trust that we consider to be the most pressing at the international level and which researchers both in international relations and in trust studies should tackle. They pertain to the processes of trust-building, the ways in which it could be demonstrated whether globally or at least regionally trusting relationships are becoming more robust, and finally the normative desirability of trusting relationships among states.

The overarching idea behind this review article is to facilitate interdisciplinary research between international relations and trust studies. Neglecting the international level would be a missed opportunity for the latter, while the former needs to think more carefully about the transformative potential that the concept of trust holds for dealing with thorny issues of international politics. The mutual engagement between the two fields promises strong potential for theoretical innovation as well as practical impact.

## **Trust in a Condition of Anarchy**

The largest obstacle facing scholars who wish to theorise about trust in international politics stems from the idea of *anarchy*. Within the field of international relations, anarchy denotes the absence of an overarching authority which could enforce rules, laws, and contracts. This lack of a central arbiter for disputes and conflicts fundamentally differentiates the international system from domestic systems which are *hierarchical* due to the presence of a recognized authority, the government.

The idea of anarchy magnifies the impact of uncertainty about the motives of others. In such a structural setting, each state is formally the equal of all the others entitled to act in its best interest. The result is, as Kenneth Waltz (1979, p. 88) puts it, that 'none is entitled to command; none is required to obey.' Though states might sign treaties with each other, these do not have the same ordering force as domestic contracts do. States not only legislate for themselves the rules that they wish to obey, but in general are also 'the supreme authority for interpreting and giving concrete meaning to their own legislative enactments.' (Morgenthau, 1978, p. 286) Theorising relations between states given the condition of anarchy is the primary focus to most international relations theories.

The implications of the idea of anarchy for the study of trust in international politics have long been accepted as obvious: anarchy prevents, or at least severely hinders, the formation of trusting relationships. This assumption is often accompanied by the belief that states must mistrust each other. Hoffman (2006, p. 35) summarises the argument noting that in the absence of a legitimate central power, the possibility that other states might act opportunistically, and have a good chance of getting away with it should they choose to do so, destroys any expectations of trustworthiness. The consequences of such potential opportunism are severe. Misplaced trust could lead to a state being dominated by others or, in extreme cases, to its disappearance. Even when states do not fear external domination, the state leadership could face increased domestic political competition arising from the political fallout of the misplaced trust. Either way, leaders are therefore wary to trust in the first place (Hoffman, 2006, p. 8). Thus, despite sharing a mutual interest in solving a dispute, states might not cooperate because they will fear the other might take advantage of their trusting attitude.

The fear of misplaced trust can be modelled as the Prisoner's Dilemma. Unless the other state's compliance can be monitored and a timely warning of cheating received, states will be wary of entering into agreements for fear of receiving the sucker payoff (Axelrod, 1990; Larson, 1997, p. 7). Sometimes the monitoring needs to be so stringent that cooperation will be functionally impossible (Larson, 1997, p. 8). Even if cooperation does take place, a state might still worry that the other state will take advantage of the recent reduction in tensions, particularly if defection is more costly later in the game. (Larson, 1997, p. 9).

Another way to understand the problem of trusting under the condition of anarchy is through the concept of a *security dilemma* (Booth & Wheeler, 2008; Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). Attempts by states to make themselves feel more secure could lead other states to feel less secure. As Booth and Wheeler show, states witnessing such activity, for instance a military build-up, face two dilemmas. First, they must interpret whether the increased military capabilities are a result of defensive or offensive intentions; and second, they must decide how to respond. (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, pp. 4-5).

The high costs of misinterpreting the other state's intentions means that both states can fall into a security spiral where ever greater resources are spent on defence, but neither state feels more secure because of the insecurity generated by the attempts of the other to become secure (Jervis, 1976, pp. 58-113; Kydd, 2005, p. 13; Kydd & Walter, 2006, p. 57). This is classically demonstrated in arms races, but can also apply to phenomena such as the late 19th century competition for colonies or the desire of France to keep Germany weak after World War I. In the security dilemma two states might have no hostile intentions, and yet, due to the lack of trust, could still end up in a dangerous situation that neither wanted.

Anarchy in the international system also exacerbates domestic factors that can undermine the formation of trusting relationships between states. Those holding antagonistic views of other states use the uncertainty inherent to anarchy to reinforce their arguments. John Tirman (2009) demonstrates the power of such adversarial narratives on the example of the highly contentious US-Iranian relationship since 1979. Additionally, domestic elites can

achieve internal unification and consolidation of power by projecting the image of the hostile outside environment.

Trust and trusting relationships in international politics are therefore marked by a considerable structural pressure. Trust researchers outside international relations rarely consider this pressure, because they typically examine processes within hierarchical realms. However, the nature and effects of international anarchy can be interpreted in various ways. Famously, Alexander Wendt argues that 'anarchy is what states make of it.' (Wendt, 1992) This means that states have some control over the characteristics of the international system in which they operate. Depending on their actions, the international realm does not have to be characterized by unmitigated competition, which opens up the possibility of forging trusting relationships.

The effects of anarchy are disputed. What is indisputable is the difference between the anarchical international realm and hierarchical domestic settings. Mistrust can become a self-fulfilling prophecy in both environments, but its consequences are far more dire in the former. It is therefore important that a growing number of studies have suggested both theoretical and empirical possibilities of trusting relationships between states. For instance, trust scholars have shown the importance of trust in the founding of the United States and the European Community (Hoffman, 2006); Argentine-Brazilian nuclear cooperation (Wheeler, 2009); attempts to broker better relations between India and Pakistan (Wheeler, 2010); or in the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Booth & Wheeler, 2008; Hoffman, 2006). The structural condition of anarchy cannot be used to rule out the possibility of trusting relationships a priori. Instead, its effects should be studied further, applying appropriate insights from the broader trust research.

## **Trust in International Relations: An Overview of Research**

The basic methodological question any review article must answer concerns the way in which it systematizes the body of literature under its scrutiny. Is it more preferable to adopt a chronological or a typological approach? Each choice carries its own advantages and disadvantages. Chronological presentation can offer an evolutionary perspective on the development of the literature, demonstrating connections and influences between subsequent contributions. Grounded in the cumulative view of knowledge production, it can properly recognize the role of the initial explorers while at the same time pointing out the state of the art research. But would it be a useful organizing tool for those instances when a body of literature has expanded rapidly within a short period of time and one can only identify at best weak cumulative tendencies? For such occasions, the typological approach seems to be more appropriate. It allows for grouping research according to conceptual, theoretical, or methodological criteria, reflecting the actual choices made by various researchers. This enables one to spot tendencies in the literature even without any as yet apparent lineage. There is, however, a price to pay, namely the possibility of disagreement about the typological criteria. Why, for instance, should the literature be divided on conceptual rather than methodological grounds?

Mindful of these difficulties, this review essay adopts the typological approach. It will be apparent to the readers that the research on trust produced in the field of international relations has grown very quickly. Thus, while there are some historical legacies and early pioneers to be acknowledged, much of the literature has sprung up nearly simultaneously. An additional reason for our preference is the fact that this allows us to map the strands of trust research in international relations back onto the main research threads in trust studies. In short, we can trace sources on which international relations scholars have drawn. Our main criterion for grouping the contributions together is the way in which the various authors treat the key concept of trust. On this basis we outline three main approaches to the study of trust in relations among states. The first theorizes trust as a type of rational choice calculation. The second understands trust as a social phenomenon. The third considers trust in its psychological dimensions. Each approach is typically, but not exclusively, connected with specific theoretical and methodological choices which we note. But we consider the particular conceptualizations of trust as the most distinctive feature.

### **Trust as a Rational Choice Calculation**

Rational choice theory has long informed a strong tradition within the study of international relations. It attempts to offer a solution to the problems of uncertainty and commitment, which states encounter under the conditions of international anarchy, by examining their expectations and preferences within matrices of rationally calculable pay-offs. It relies heavily on formal modelling and, in some early instances, on laboratory behavioural experiments. The pioneering research exploring the role of trust in this manner was conducted by Morton Deutsch and his collaborators in the late 1950s. Working with the basic game theoretical model of the Prisoner's Dilemma, Deutsch (1958, p. 270) made a powerful argument that 'there is no possibility for "rational" behaviour in it [the game] unless the conditions for mutual trust exist.' Trust is the actor's *expectation* of an occurrence (M. Deutsch, 1958, p. 266), in this case, the non-defection of the other prisoner, which effectively solves the dilemma making cooperation the dominant strategy.<sup>2</sup> While it did not articulate any explicit connection to international politics of the day, the article formulated hypotheses - concerning the role of communication, power, and the third parties in establishing or hindering the development of trust – which were imminently applicable to the international arena.

A more explicit attempt to consider the role of trust in specifically international questions, such as the formation and maintenance of alliances or the reliability of arms control agreements, came several years later from Bernhardt Lieberman (1964). Lieberman was perhaps the first scholar to clearly identify what have become the two dominant views on trust in the study of international relations – one arguing that to trust is dangerous and states can ill

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<sup>2</sup> Importantly, Deutsch differentiates the expectation associated with trust from other types of expectations. Deutsch notes that trust 'leads to behavior which he [the actor] perceives to have greater negative motivational consequences if the expectation is not confirmed than positive motivational consequences if it is confirmed,' where motivational consequences are defined as events that change, or prevent a change, in the welfare of the individual (M. Deutsch, 1958, p. 266).

afford it, the other claiming that international conflicts are intractable because of the lack of trust. He rejected the 'personal-moral' perspective on trust as impractical in international politics and instead put forward the notion of 'trust based on interest' (Lieberman, 1964, p. 273). Lieberman tried to coin the rather cumbersome 'i-trust' label, combining his notions of interest and trust, which did not catch on. The conceptualization stressed the recognition of the necessity to 'form a stable, continuing alliance, because such a situation often yields the greatest payoff to the members of the coalition.' (Lieberman, 1964, p. 279) Its emphasis on trusting and being trustworthy out of one's own as well as the other's interest makes Lieberman's ideas similar to Russell Hardin's well-known conceptualization of trust as encapsulated interest (Hardin, 2002).

Lieberman's thinking was novel in aligning the concept of trust with rational choice theory. This move, however, likely accounts for the lack of interest in trust during the ensuing decades. If there was no normative dimension to the concept, no personal or moral consideration, was it really necessary to operate with the concept of trust, instead of more sophisticated game-theoretical models demonstrating the preferred pay-off structures? Thus perhaps the two most seminal works in international relations inspired by rational choice theory – Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation* and Robert Keohane's *After Hegemony* – despite exploring much the same questions, and even using some of the models applied by Deutsch and Lieberman, do not work with the concept of trust at all (Axelrod, 1990; Keohane, 1984).<sup>3</sup> Remarkably, Axelrod goes so far as to tout as one of the encouraging findings of his cooperation theory the fact that 'there is no need to assume trust between the players.' (Axelrod, 1990, p. 174)

The rational choice conceptualization of trust received a major impetus from the work of Andrew Kydd beginning in the late 1990s. Through a series of articles and a book, he became undoubtedly the most prominent rational choice theorist of trust within international relations. Building on the work of sociologist James Coleman, Kydd defines trust in three ways throughout his work. First, as the 'estimate of how likely it is that the other is status quo oriented, rather than revisionist,' (Kydd, 2001, p. 810). This reflects the perennial concern in international politics whether states will be content with the existing world order,<sup>4</sup> such as the United States in the post-Cold War period, or whether states will try to fundamentally change it, as for instance Germany's attempt to do so between the two world wars. The presence of revisionist states is bound with a greater likelihood of conflict precisely because their motivation to change the existing order makes them prone to defection and untrustworthy behaviour. Second, trust for Kydd (2005, p. 3) is 'a belief that the other side is trustworthy, that is, willing to reciprocate cooperation,'. This touches on fundamental questions such as whether and how states might generate gains from mutually advantageous arrangements when simultaneously facing the possibility of cheating and defection. The classical example is arms control negotiations and agreements, where both sides would benefit from limiting their military expenses, but must be alert to the other side gaining the upper hand in the

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<sup>3</sup> See also their joint-authored article (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985)

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, (Carr, 1939; Davidson, 2006; Johnston, 2003; Rynning & Ringsmose, 2008)



relationship if it managed to circumvent the agreed restrictions.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Kydd (2010, p. 2680) defines trust as 'having confidence that one's interests are not in too much conflict with the other side.' Two states coveting the same territory, as is the case, for example, in the on-going territorial disputes between China and Japan in the East China Sea, are unlikely to trust each other. Though all these definitions are somewhat different, what ties them together is the idea that trust is a rational prediction about the nature or characteristics of the other state, be they its status quo orientation, the willingness to reciprocate cooperation, or the compatibility of its interests. In all instances, the importance of trust rests in its direct contribution to the success or failure of international cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

Kydd's main input is his conceptualisation of trust as relating to more than a Prisoner's Dilemma situation. Instead of the narrow focus on that game, he proposes two complications. First, he adds uncertainty about the preferences of the other party into the calculation. Second, he argues that trust is not simply a belief about the probability that the other side will cooperate, but a belief about the *preferences* of the other side, be they either Prisoner's Dilemma or Assurance Game preferences.<sup>7</sup> A belief that the other state has Prisoner's Dilemma preferences makes it untrustworthy, while a belief that the other state has Assurance Game preferences makes it trustworthy. The importance of the distinction between a belief about the preferences of the other side instead of a belief about the mere probability of cooperation is that it helps to understand why even trustworthy actors sometimes fail to cooperate (Kydd, 2005, pp. 9-11). As Kydd (2005, p. 11) puts it, 'Hitler might think Britain the most trustworthy state in the world, and yet realize that the likelihood that Churchill will cooperate with him is zero.'

From the rational choice perspective, the problem of mistrust at the international level therefore ultimately boils down to whether Assurance Game actors believe that the other side may have Prisoner's Dilemma preferences (Kydd, 2005, pp. 6-8). Kydd proceeds to define the *level of trust* that one actor has in relation to the other as the probability that the first actor assumes the other actor to be trustworthy. Cooperation is possible only when the level of trust exceeds a minimum trust threshold for each party, which is defined as the range of probabilities of trust where the expected value of cooperation is positive (Kydd, 2005, p. 9). Crucially, in international politics this range is influenced by external factors. For instance, in situations where the costs of conflict are high and the advantage of first strikes low, there will be a low minimum threshold of trust necessary for cooperation (Kydd, 2005, p. 41). A good example is the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War once both sides secured the capability to retaliate to any nuclear strike launched by the other side. The costs of conflict were extremely high, equalling practically to a total destruction, while the advantages of initiating a nuclear exchange were small, because the other side retained the ability to inflict massive damage.

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<sup>5</sup> See also (Kydd, 2012) Talbott 1995; Meyer Inter Security 1984; Adelman For Aff 1984;

<sup>6</sup> See also (Kydd, 2005-06, p. 620; 2010, p. 2676)

<sup>7</sup> Unlike the Prisoner's Dilemma, where the optimum strategy for both sides is to defect, in the Assurance Game, the optimum strategy is to cooperate if the other side is likely to cooperate, but to otherwise defect (Kydd, 2005, pp. 7-8).

If states find themselves in a situation where large external pressures inhibit trust – Kydd calls this a noncooperative equilibrium – there is no possibility of cooperation because both security-seeking and revisionist states will do the same thing, defect. These situations matter not only because they automatically produce defection, but also because it is impossible for Assurance Game actors to differentiate between Assurance Game and Prisoner’s Dilemma actors. There is no possibility of learning the other’s type. Alternatively, in a cooperative equilibrium, or what Kydd terms a separating equilibrium, the external conditions allow Assurance Game actors to cooperate, and therefore they can begin to distinguish the other’s type through the process of iterative learning (Kydd, 2005, p. 42). Kydd showed the analytical purchase of this model in his examination of the end of the Cold War, where the United States and the Soviet Union were able to ‘get cooperation going by setting up an initial round to test the waters.’ (Kydd, 2005, p. 204)

Kydd’s creative application of the rational choice definition of trust elucidates two fundamental problems of interstate relations: 1) under what structural conditions might states trust, and therefore cooperate; 2) how these structural conditions can affect the learning processes about other state’s type. Despite these significant contributions, several questions arise. Does the rational choice conceptualization of trust simply equate to cooperation? In other words, is there a risk of misunderstanding the role of trust in international politics, because this model implies that where there is cooperation, there ought to be trust? If this is the case, one might ask how does the concept trust advance the highly developed rational choice literature about cooperation? Perhaps more importantly, is the rational choice conceptualization of trust powerful enough to disregard the potential social dynamics of trust in international relations? States and their representatives are not fully rational actors in pursuit of the best pay-offs, irrespective of their efforts to convey such image (Mercer, 2013). It is, nevertheless, a testament to the contribution of the rational choice conceptualization of trust that these questions could not be posed without it.

## **Trust as a Social Phenomenon**

The end of the Cold War brought a renewed emphasis on the role of ideas and social processes in the study of international relations.<sup>8</sup> Crucial in this regard was the difficulty of explaining the waning of the superpower confrontation in the absence of any significant change in the underlying distribution of material capabilities between the competitors. This was a surprising outcome, for major changes in international politics had long been expected to come as a result of an accumulation of resources followed by war. The end of the Cold War led many observers to look for explanation beyond the pay-off matrices and material interests of states. Rather than holding on to the logic of expected consequences, where actors achieve cooperation by bargaining about the distribution of pay-offs on the basis of their pre-existing interests, scholars began to examine more seriously the role of the logic of appropriateness in the international system (March & Olsen, 1998). This research emphasizes the relationship

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<sup>8</sup> This literature is known in the field as social constructivism. Major works include (Finnemore, 1996; Hopf, 1998; Katzenstein, 1996; Kratochwil, 1991; Onuf, 1989; Ruggie, 1998; Wendt, 1992, 1999).

between rules and identities. Cooperation is a result of compatible identities and behaviour following appropriate rules (March & Olsen, 1998, pp. 951-952). Such a view of international politics provides important possibilities for the study of trust in relations among states, because it incorporates the social and relational dynamics between actors.

Accordingly, scholars who study trust as a social phenomenon tend to begin their analyses by defining trust as confidence in expectations that others will 'do what is right.' (Hoffman, 2006, p. 20) They typically draw on seminal contributions to trust research such as those of Bernard Barber (1983), Martin Hollis (1998), or Eric Uslaner (2002). The contrast with the rational choice position is stark. The trustor is not merely a rational actor placing a bet on the behaviour of others, but proceeds on the belief that 'trustees have a responsibility to fulfil the trust placed in them even if it means sacrificing some of their own benefits.' (Hoffman, 2002, p. 379) Aaron Hoffman argues that this perspective, which he calls the *fiduciary approach*, distinguishes the concept of trust from the broader category of risk. He notes the distinction is empirically justified, for we judge others as 'upright' or 'honorable,' and not just 'a good bet.' (Hoffman, 2002, p. 381) As Charles Kegley and Raymond Gregory stress in their exploratory study of trust in international alliances, 'to keep peace, allies would be advised to keep promises.' (Kegley & Raymond, 1990, p. 263)

A similar position has been articulated by Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler who note the rational choice approach overlooks the human factor, or the 'feelings and attachments' that grow between leaders (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, pp. 145-158). A typical example is the relationship between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid- to late-1980s, which is said to have facilitated the peaceful end of the Cold War. Nicholas Wheeler (2010) later applied the same lenses to the ultimately unsuccessful trust-building process between India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Pakistani opposite Nawaz Sharif. Both instances highlight the personal and emotional basis of trust, the critical role of the 'leap in the dark' involved in trusting, and the idea that trust is an on-going two-way relationship (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, p. 232).

The expectation others will do what is right, however, does not automatically bind those being trusted to particular actions. Trust is relational precisely because no matter what one does, it cannot be imposed on others. In trust research, this argument is articulated by Claus Offe (1999, p. 43), who cautions that trust 'cannot easily be brought into being through strategic action'. Within the context of the study of international politics, Aaron Hoffman likewise argues that, while 'trustors create trusting relationships; trustees determine the success of these relationships.' (Hoffman, 2006, p. 22)

Taking both risk and obligation into account, the behavioural manifestation of trust is what Hoffman (2002, p. 377) calls a trusting relationship. This concept presupposes a social structure, where actors interact in more or less dense webs of meaning. As such, trusting relationships must include not only the idea of risk, but also the idea of obligation (Hoffman, 2002, p. 376). Additionally, social trust theorists interpret the act when trustors place their trust in trustees less as an outcome of 'the certainty produced when actors bind themselves to particular outcomes,' but more as stemming 'out of an essential faith.' (Hoffman, 2006, p. 7) It seems to us, however, that scholars of international relations favouring the notions of the

'leap' or 'faith' would be better served by following Guido Möllering's concept of suspension. Suspension, conceived 'as the process that enables actors to deal with irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability', serves the same function as the leap of faith (Möllering, 2006, p. 110). But it is based on a combination of 'reason, routine, and reflexivity', all of which are more likely to appeal to policy- and decision-makers who typically strive to project the image of rational and calculating actors who are not swayed by emotions.

Similarly to Hoffman's use of obligation, Ruzicka and Wheeler, in what they call a binding approach to trust, focus on the centrality of promises and their role in establishing and maintaining a trusting relationship. They argue that in such a relationship actors will honour their promises even if they have something to gain from defecting, based on the fact that 'they value both its existence and continuation.' (Ruzicka & Wheeler, 2010, p. 73) This allows Ruzicka and Wheeler to explain the persistence of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) despite the fact that it created massive power and status disparities between the five recognized nuclear weapon states and all the other signatories who agreed to forego the acquisition of atomic weapons.

The analytical contribution of conceptualizing trust with as a belief that the other will "do what is right" is significant. It enables observers to identify trusting relationships with a greater degree of precision. For instance, from the rationalist perspective the nuclear relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War could be understood as trusting since both countries predicted that the other would not launch their nuclear weapons under conditions of uncertainty (Hoffman, 2002, p. 379). However, the absurdity of classifying that relationship as trusting is readily apparent, given the extent of hostility and animosity which it entailed. Conceptualizations of trust based merely on predictability of actions simply cannot differentiate between trust and other factors such as coercion or deterrence, which might also encourage actors to take risks. As Hoffman (2002, p. 381) puts it, 'trust implies risk, but risk-taking does not necessarily imply trust.' By introducing the notions of obligation or bond, scholars can differentiate between trust and the broader category of risk.

The concept of trusting relationship is also explored by Keating and Ruzicka (2014), who use it to demonstrate the difference between the concepts of trust and confidence. Drawing on the work of Niklas Luhmann, specifically his contention that trust allows actors to cognitively reduce or eliminate the overall amount of risk and uncertainty, Keating and Ruzicka (2014, p. 2) pose a crucial question for the students of international politics: 'How can one identify a trusting relationship between two states?' To answer the question, they propose to focus on whether and how states adopt or decline hedging strategies vis-à-vis other states. To have a trusting relationship leads states not to hedge against the potentially negative consequences of other's actions, because such actions are cognitively considered to be zero within a trusting relationship. They argue that the assessment of the intentions of the other state, found in both rationalist and some social theorists of trust, should properly be labelled confidence. The important difference between these two concepts is that, 'confidence does not reduce the perception of risk, trust does.' (Keating & Ruzicka, 2014, p. 4) This approach carries two advantages when analysing trusting relationships. First, it offers the opportunity to examine them without relying either on actors' assertions or the logically convoluted notions

of a 'leap of faith' or the 'acceptance of vulnerability'. Second, it opens up the possibility of process-tracing the formation of such relationships over longer periods of time. Therefore, it takes seriously the habitual nature of trust underpinning the social approach.<sup>9</sup>

However, the question of how much the social approach adds to the rationalist understanding of trust remains. Various authors might claim that the social aspect of trust is important, but does this merely add to the value of the trusting relationship in the calculation of the actors? For instance, despite stressing the importance of social obligation, Hoffman still falls back on the trustors' perceptions of the trustees to fulfil the obligation, just like a rationalist scholar would. The difference is the nature of the obligation itself. States trust because they 'have the belief that their trustees are obliged to fulfil their trust' and that 'trustworthy individuals are those deemed likely to uphold the obligations that our trust bestows upon them.' (Hoffman, 2006, p. 22)

The connection between the rationalist and social camps is perhaps most apparent in the work of Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler. Their conceptualization of trust spans both the rationalist and social approaches, moving between trust as predictability and trust as a bond. Thus, a minimalist conception of trust is the belief based on the mutual interpretation of each other's behaviour that the other state can be relied upon not to act in ways that will be injurious to the interests or values of the first state. A maximalist conception of trust, on the other hand, becomes apparent when actors mutually attempt to promote each other's values and interests (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, p. 229). Though Booth and Wheeler attempt to link the two approaches, it is unclear from their explanation how trust can be transformed from an expectation to a personal bond. Nicholas Wheeler's most recent work emphasizes the role of empathy developed between top policy-makers during face-to-face summits (Wheeler, 2013). While interpersonal communication is clearly central to the process of empathizing, it remains to be established whether this is a more generally valid explanation of interstate trust-building.

The questions concerning a coherent conceptualisation of trust notwithstanding, Booth and Wheeler make an important contribution in their emphasis on the fact that trust, even in international politics, can be present and operate at several levels. For instance, trust might only exist at the elite level between leaders, as when the process of the Franco-German reconciliation began in the 1950s and 1960s, or it might become embedded widely within political units when trusting relationships are replicated at the broad societal levels, as when the same process of reconciliation continued in the decades after (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, p. 230). In this regard, Booth and Wheeler introduce to the study of trust among states the perennial problem of the levels of analysis (Singer, 1961), something that trust researchers ought to take seriously.

## **Trust as a Psychological Phenomenon**

The question of the appropriate level of analysis is of fundamental importance to the final

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<sup>9</sup> The use of habitual thinking as a theoretical tool to understand international relations is a recent phenomenon, see (Hopf, 2010)

approach to the study of trust in international politics, which treats trust as psychological phenomenon. In the interplay between agents and structures, scholars adopting this line of inquiry favour the individual actors who act on behalf of collective units such as states. They argue that the rational approach, and to a lesser degree also the social approach, miss the key point of trust, which is how its psychological dimension produces particular effects. Psychological predispositions and emotions of actors therefore take a prominent role and must be investigated with regard to the formation and maintenance of trust between individuals acting on the international stage. Such research is nested within a broader approach to international politics, which stresses the significance of psychological factors shaping perceptions, judgments, and decisions (Jervis, 1976; Mercer, 1996).

The idea of treating trust in international politics as a psychological phenomenon was first developed in depth by Deborah Welch Larson in her analysis of the US-Soviet relations during the Cold War. Published in the late 1990s, her book foreshadowed the wave of interest in the study of trust within the field of international relations. While Larson begins with a rational choice framework by explicitly borrowing her conceptualization of trust from economists - trust is the 'subjective probability that the other will perform an action upon which the success of one's *own* decision depends and in a context where one must decide before the other's behavior can be monitored,' (Larson, 1997, p. 12) - she adds a psychological dimension, arguing that trust is different from mere expectations for two reasons. First, trust creates a sense of regret in the poor decision, not just mere disappointment. Second, misplaced trust generates a moral outrage not present in decisions driven purely from rational expectations (Larson, 1997, p. 19). From the psychological perspective trust includes predictability, credibility, and good intentions.

Curiously, Larson demonstrates the importance of trust negatively, by tracing several instances where *mistrust* prevented cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union, even when they shared interests and preferences. Deploying the counterfactual method, she shows how trust, as opposed to mistrust, would have made a difference in their various dealings. Additionally, she demonstrates how mistrust was rooted in ideological beliefs, cognitive biases, and historical narratives, which made it extremely difficult to overcome entrenched perceptions. To trust, actors must interpret others' actions and such interpretations are impossible without psychological factors such as beliefs and images. This further reinforces the importance of individuals when it comes to the study of trust in international politics.

Another group of scholars study trust from an individual psychological perspective, but do so by focussing on the link between emotions and trust. Jonathan Mercer (2005, p. 95), for instance, argues that trust is 'a feeling of optimism in another's goodwill and competence.' This feeling goes beyond the observable evidence presented to an agent, where 'people give the benefit of the doubt to those they trust, and doubt anything beneficial done by those they distrust.' (Mercer, 2005, p. 95) Drawing on social identity theory, Mercer claims that identity produces an emotion that creates trust, which then can be used to solve collective action problems. It is this strong feeling of group identity that leads to cooperation, sharing, the perception of the mutuality of interests, and a willingness to sacrifice particular individual interests for group interests.

Mercer (2005, p. 96) argues that trusting individuals will cooperate even when they know that others within the identity group are defecting, and will not leave the group even if it is in their interest to do so. But the benefit of the link between identity and trust that stabilises these relationships also creates problems. If trust relies on identity, then this could lead to an automatic discrimination between insiders and outsiders. As Mercer (2005, p. 97) puts it, 'in-group trust does not require out-group distrust - which is a feeling of pessimism about another's goodwill and competence - but it does require one to distinguish between trusting one's group and not trusting an out-group.'<sup>10</sup> Recognising the role of emotion in trust might help us to understand how distinct groups form larger collectives, such as security communities whose members share a 'we-feeling', and why trusting relationships form so rarely (Mercer, 2005, pp. 97-98).

Booth and Wheeler, drawing on Mercer, offer a way of addressing the in-group vs. out-group problem. They note that one of the characteristics of trust is empathy and bonding, or actors' ability to 'internalise the hopes and fears of another by imaginatively taking on as far as possible their emotions/feelings and psychological realities,' particularly an ability to empathise with fear (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, p. 237). Naomi Head (2012, pp. 37-38) likewise argues that decisions to trust are not purely rational. Some decisions to trust against the odds, or distrust despite the odds, can be explained by examining the emotions underlying the situation. She suggests two potential sources of change leading to trusting relationships - either new evidence as to the type of actor one is facing becomes available, or, crucially in the psychological context, actors consciously exercise empathy (Head, 2012, p. 38). The ability to empathise with the fear of others opens up the door to the creation of trusting relationships.

A different take on the emotional character of trust is put forward by Torsten Michel (Michel, 2013). Following the argument of Bernd Lahno (2001), he claims that scholars of international relations should distinguish between reliance (strategic trust) and trust (moralistic trust). In this view, calculative interactions are best characterized as reliance, whereas trust is 'a moralistic, emotive attitude.' (Michel, 2013, p. 870) Michel argues that trust forms part of practical knowledge which serves as background to actors' actions. Because of this emotive, dispositional quality towards others, instances of misplaced trust result in feelings of betrayal rather than mere disappointment. Whereas the argument makes for a decisive critique of trust-building efforts - 're-establishing trust cannot be engineered' (Michel, 2013, p. 883) - additional application to international politics is not apparent and remains yet to be worked out.

One way of doing so is suggested in the rich work of Brian Rathbun, who argues that psychology is important because it shapes statespersons' general propensity to trust in others.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while he keeps a rationalist definition of trust as the 'belief that cooperation

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<sup>10</sup> This idea has also been studied empirically by Karin Fierke (2009), who tries to show on the case of Northern Ireland how exclusive identity categories hamper the possibility of establishing trust.

<sup>11</sup> We refer to Rathbun's book which largely summarizes his findings presented in a series of preceding articles, (Rathbun, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a)

will be reciprocated,' (Rathbun, 2012b, p. 2) he shows how actors who tend to view others as untrustworthy favour unilateralism in foreign policy, whereas those generally inclined to trust are more willing to advocate multilateralism. In other words, Rathbun (2012b, p. 3) is interested in the phenomenon of 'generalised' trust, which is produced by the disposition of the statesperson, and how it is differentiated from strategic trust.

Working closely with Eric Uslaner's research, Rathbun (2012b, pp. 24-25) claims that generalised trust is 'moralistic', because it is based on an assessment of the general benevolent character and honesty of others, and not simply an assessment of their interests. Trust is 'ideological in nature, rooted in a broader worldview about the nature of social relations.' (Rathbun, 2012b, p. 3) Generalised trusters tend to create international institutions with more binding commitments, less flexibility and more members, unlike generalised non-trusters who will prefer limited commitments, vetoes and opt-out clauses (Rathbun, 2012b, p. 6). Rathbun notes that in the United States, generalised trusters and non-trusters can be roughly mapped onto the social psychology of the left and the right. This offers an answer to why some states have Prisoner's Dilemma preferences and others Assurance Game preferences, a question unresolved in Andrew Kydd's work. Variation in generalised trust means that different political actors can see their strategic environment quite differently though they find themselves in the same situation (Rathbun, p. xiii).

This finding is important because without the notion of generalised trusters it is difficult to understand why cooperation in multilateral settings would start in the first place. The presence of generalised trusters answers the questions of how and why states initiate cooperation without adequate information about the other states, and how they sustain cooperation amidst inconsistent behaviour or when interactions are infrequent. It also explains why large international organisations keep functioning given an almost certain divergence of interests among states and explains diffuse reciprocity over time (Rathbun, 2012b, pp. 17-19). For example, Rathbun's case studies elucidate why the United States stayed outside of the League of Nations after World War I as well as why the United States took an active part in shaping the United Nations and NATO following World War II.

Conceptualizing trust as a psychological phenomenon makes intuitive sense even in international politics. After all, states and organizations are represented by individual human beings who trust or distrust their counterparts and interlocutors. The role of high ranking officials is clearly important independent of prevailing social structures, particularly if they can successfully break the current framing of the issue through their agency.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, a question remains as to whether the psychological approaches discount the structural constraints that individuals in these roles face both domestically and internationally.

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<sup>12</sup> Agency is fundamental in any social understanding because, as Roy Bhaskar (1979, p. 174) put it, 'nothing happens in society save in virtue of something human beings do or have done.'



## The Future of Trust Research in International Relations

Which directions, then, should the study of trust in international relations take in the future? Individual researchers will maintain a range of original venues to examine and we do not wish to prescribe any common agenda. However, we would like to outline three broad areas that we believe deserve the particular attention of trust researchers in the field of international relations and beyond - the processes of trust-building; the ways in which it could be demonstrated whether bilaterally, regionally, or even globally trusting relationships are becoming more/less robust; and finally the normative desirability of trusting relationships among states.

Much of the increased profile that the study of trust has received in international relations is the product of practitioner interest in conflict resolution. Although major wars between great powers might be the thing of the past due to the effect of nuclear weapons and the increased destructiveness of conventional armaments, the use of force to solve political disputes has not abated. Whether trust can be built among adversaries and, if so, how, is a question of great importance. Is Torsten Michel's scepticism about trust-building processes warranted or can conditions conducive to such processes be uncovered in the ways envisaged by Nicholas Wheeler? We need carefully articulated hypotheses – is it the case, for example, that accepting vulnerability can build trust? – and well-designed studies, be they individual, large-N, or comparative, to test what has long been uncritically accepted by most scholars of trust in international relations. Evidence supporting the idea that trust can be actively built is scarce and anecdotal rather than systematic. Do model instances such as Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem, or the interaction between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, tend to discount the presence of various safety nets which significantly lessened the ascribed vulnerability faced by actors and states which they represented? On the more conceptual side, those interested in trust-building should say clearly what actually characterizes a process of trust-building. All too frequently, such processes are merely equated with increased cooperation. But, especially from the point of view of social and psychological approaches, cooperation alone cannot be enough to signify a trusting relationship.

Closely related to the previous point is the need to devise better tools for identifying trusting relationships and their robustness. As Keating and Ruzicka ask, how do we know something is a trusting relationship to begin with? Signs of cooperation and actors' proclamations have inherent limits. The former can be achieved without trust; the latter can simply be self-deceptions or, worse, lies. The need to identify trusting relationships is important because, once achieved, scholars can start to think in a systematic manner about questions concerning how trust between states might be generated or maintained.<sup>13</sup> Until then, we do not actually know whether we are dealing with the relevant cases. We might be trying to learn about apples while examining oranges. Keating and Ruzicka propose to focus on the extent of hedging strategies adopted by states. This indicator has broad applicability

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, there is no necessity that one model will prevail, but the importance here is that there are at least several competing models and an active academic debate over their strengths and weaknesses.

and could be used in bilateral, regional as well as global settings. Though the most obvious way how to conceive hedging is in terms of military preparedness and expenditure, hedging strategies could be operationalized in a number of ways. But, critically, does their approach rely too much on material indicators?

The identification of trusting relationships is also important to the research on security communities, that is, groups of states among whom war is unthinkable. Although the existing literature references trust as a variable, it subsumes trust as part of the mutual identity that forms between states in a security community. Scholars might want ask is the question whether trust should be studied independently of identity formation.<sup>14</sup> In other words, do the formation and strengthening of trusting relationships precede the construction of the 'we-feeling' characteristic of a security community? If so, this would contribute to the recent debates over whether there exist interstate relationships that have the properties of security communities but lack the 'we-ness' central to the original theory (Pouliot, 2007). More importantly, it would mean that heterogeneous groups could form a global security community where war between all states becomes unthinkable.

The research on security communities could serve as methodological inspiration in the study of the robustness of trusting relationships. The research here could take two forms. On the one hand, trust researchers might deploy the tools examining frequency, density and content of communication networks, as laid out by Karl Deutsch, who is inextricably linked with the concept of security community (K. W. Deutsch et al., 1957). Alternatively, there are methods connected with the study of security communities as everyday practices, notably explored by Vincent Pouliot (2008). In either case, it is desirable to have indicators allowing us to make claims about the existence and quality of trusting relationships across time.

Trust scholars in international relations should also examine complex relationships where trust varies across different issue areas. For instance, two states might have a high level of trust in their strategic partnership, but far less in their economic relations. The example of the relationship between the United States and Japan springs to mind here. Does a change in the level of trust in one area spill over to others? Is it the case that trusting relationships need to be formed in some areas first before they can be established elsewhere? Empirically, this might be an interesting research topic for European integration scholars.

Finally, scholars studying trust at the international level should not shy away from fully exploring the question of the normative desirability of trust in interstate relations. To compensate for the traditional dismissal of trust, the recent wave of scholarship has tried to demonstrate the possibility and appeal of trust. The normative case for the development of trusting relationships is strong, precisely because some of the most pressing problems facing humanity require solutions that cannot be adopted without trust. Moreover, whatever arrangements states agree on to tackle such issues as climate change or resource depletion might depend on more than interpersonal bonds of trust between leaders. Measures will take years to adopt and will have to be maintained for decades, spanning well beyond the time-frame of most office holders in most states. Under those conditions, trusting relationships will

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<sup>14</sup> An initial attempt to tackle this question is offered by (Keating & Wheeler, 2013).

need to be formed between collectivities. The case for the normative desirability of at the interstate levels cannot be based merely on empirical illustrations. A full-fledged normative argument grounded in a general view of international politics is required. It is possible that it will show that the degree of enthusiasm for trust in international politics needs to be toned down. Such a finding, however, would not be a reason to abandon the study of trust and trusting relationships in international politics. On the contrary, it would allow trust researchers to explore the subject with a better sense of limitations and the promise it holds.

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