The launch of the ASEAN Regional Forum resonated with the ideas of comprehensive security enshrined in ASEAN processes and the new ideas of co-operative security developed in Europe in the late 1980s. That fusion, what might be called ‘Co-operative Security 1.0,’ has been an integral part of a system that has enjoyed peace for a generation. But it is no longer enough to address increasing nationalism and the tensions produced as the rise of China challenges the predominance of the US. It’s time to develop “Co-operative Security 2.0.”
The Trust Deficit And How to Fix It
By David A. Welch

Despite decades of peace in East Asia, serious threats to regional security exist, particularly between countries such as China and Japan, which have historical and territorial grievances that have proven immune to resolution. Trust deficits among these countries stand in the way of a genuine security community in much of the region.

Yet the US and Japan, bitter adversaries in the Second World War, have managed to overcome their past and build a relationship based on trust. The key to achieving that is empathy, a concept new to the discourse on security order, writes David A. Welch.

ONE OF the most remarkable recent developments in world affairs is the evolution of “security communities,” or regions where the threat or use of force plays no role whatsoever in relations among states. This is remarkable because, quite simply, humans are warlike, or at least capable of violence on scales both large and small, and for almost 99 percent of recorded human history, the idea of war being unthinkable was, well … unthinkable. And yet in Northern and Western Europe, North America and Australasia the idea that states would seriously consider solving disputes by means of force today is as laughable as the idea that countries elsewhere would not.

To some extent, the evolution of security communities may simply be a natural step along a larger path of moral progress. Victors in war no longer cannibalize losers; dueling has died out; slavery has gone underground; and interstate war is becoming more and more rare. But moral progress is patchy, uneven, and never monotonic. In an age of nuclear weapons, we cannot yet afford to be overly optimistic or complacent about the prospects for a general pacification of international relations.

Nowhere can we less afford complacency than in East Asia, where in no fewer than four important flashpoints — the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea — important countries armed with nuclear weapons find themselves on opposite sides of important disputes. In all four cases, two of the countries concerned are the United States and China, the world’s first- and second-largest economies, respectively. Washington and Beijing consistently profess benign motives and peaceful desires, but tensions between them are palpable and rising.
leading many analysts to conclude that the underlying problem is a classical power transition of the kind that all too often leads to a hegemonic war, or at least a radical and dangerous disagreement on the future of regional or global order.2

Interestingly, the protagonists in East Asia’s various disputes all lament the lack of “strategic trust” and stress the importance of building it.3 Trust is, in fact, what makes a security community possible. Today one can cross from France into Germany without even so much as stopping to show a passport. Within living memory France and Germany had the most heavily militarized border in the world and fought two ghostly, devastating wars. In East Asia, only the US and its close allies enjoy relationships in which it has become unthinkable to threaten or use force to solve disputes. The fact that Japan and the US now find themselves in a genuine security community is particularly notable given the intensity and barbarity with which they fought one another during the Second World War. This change did not happen overnight, of course, and it was far from monotonic. But it is now complete. Japan and the US now see each other as “us,” no longer as “them.” How did this happen? What made it possible? Why can we not say the same thing of China and Japan, or China and the US?

The “Realist” answer would be that China simply has too many conflicts of interest with Japan and the US, including conflicts over issues of “high politics” of the kind that historically have most easily led to war. On this reading, Japan and the US could form a security community because they had no major outstanding disputes and stood on the same side of important geopolitical issues. But this explanation is unsatisfying for at least two reasons. First, conflicts of interest abound within security communities, and often the disagreements are vital, heated and intense. Today, we are witnessing profound discord within Europe over migration, border controls, and the terms and conditions of membership in the European Union. Recently, we witnessed intense disagreements over the appropriate way to handle the Greek debt crisis, which potentially threatened the future of the euro zone. In 2003, in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the US and Britain found themselves on one side of the highest of high politics issues against what US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld dersively called “Old Europe.” These were issues with real material stakes, unlike the useless islands dispute that has recently poisoned Sino-Japanese relations. Second, no matter how heated transatlantic disputes become, parties on both sides know that the other means them no harm. This contrasts very sharply with Sino-Japanese relations. Trust is a function of identity, not of interests.

Taken together, these two rejoinders to Realism point to an important, underappreciated fact: identity conflicts are more important than material conflicts. Canada and the US, for instance, have a useless island dispute in the Gulf of Maine that no one feels particularly strongly about and that poses no threat to amicable relations. Canada and Denmark have another useless island dispute in the high Arctic that serves only as a source of mirth. Territory and sovereignty may indeed be the highest of high politics, but the nature of the relationship between the contestents is everything when determining whether a sovereignty dispute is dangerous. How is it that Canada and Denmark, Canada and the US, France and Germany, or Japan and the US know that they need not worry when conflicts of interest arise?

The answer lies in the concept of empathy, which has only recently entered the discourse over regional security. Empathy is the capacity to see the world from another’s perspective. It is distinct from sympathy, which is actually sharing that perspective. Years of intense interaction and close co-operation help dispel important misconceptions. Thus, Americans today know full well that Japan has transcended its militarist past, that it has fully internalized norms of peaceful conflict resolution, and that it can be counted upon to play a positive, constructive role in world affairs — even in security affairs — if given the chance. Conversely, Japanese know today that the US has moved beyond its haughty hegemonic attitude, no longer takes a paternalistic attitude toward Japan as politically and morally underdeveloped and in need of American tutelage, and sees Japan as a full partner in providing the regional public good of stability and security. Japan and the US do agree, of course, on most substantive policy issues, at least as far as international security is concerned, which means that they enjoy quite a high level of sympathy as well; but even adversaries with very sharp disagreements on substantive matters can build enough empathy to know that they can be trusted not to undermine each other or stab each other in the back, as the final years of the Cold War so clearly show. US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, on the one hand, and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, on the other, did not agree on fundamental ideological issues, but they did agree — and came to know that they did agree — on the primary threats to world peace, which were misunderstanding, misperception, misjudgment, miscommunication, and inadvertent conflict. They came to understand — and to know that they all understood — that nuclear deterrence threatened, rather than promoted, peace.

Empathy will not, of course, solve all problems. Sometimes states simply have conflicting and incompatible identities and actually do wish each other harm, at least under certain circumstances. No amount of empathy will improve cross-Straits relations, for example. China has lost Taiwan forever, unless it conquers it by force. The majority of Taiwanese are no longer interested in reunification, even with a democratic China, and pro-independence sentiment will clearly deepen with time. The only question is whether mainland
China will lose interest or patience first. This is why the Taiwan Strait is a particularly dangerous flashpoint. Taiwan’s fate depends upon a rising China’s continued forbearance. There is a significant danger that an independence-minded Taiwanese government might rationally calculate, as did Austria with respect to Serbia, and Germany with respect to Russia, in 1914 (and Japan with respect to the US in 1941), that in the face of adverse trends, a desperate gamble now is better than certain disaster later.

But at other times, empathy can clear obstacles to trust. As my colleagues and I at the Centre for International Governance Innovation’s project on “Confidence, Trust, and Empathy in Asia-Pacific Security” have found, 80 percent of China’s leadership, whose external behavior provides better evidence of a sense of insecurity than of arrogance. Chinese leaders very clearly feel caught between China’s continued forbearance. There is a significant risk that the Japanese discourse on Japan’s “threat.”

While some of the Chinese discourse on Japan may reflect the tactical value of keeping Japan on the defensive and keeping Chinese public opinion focused on external rather than internal challenges, even allowing for this, it is clear that many Chinese fundamentally misunderstand contemporary Japan, which, as the United States (in contrast) has come to know, threatens no one, because all but a small coterie of unreconstructed ultranationalists who have no chance of assuming power have viscerally rejected Japan’s militarist past.

In Japan, it is virtually received wisdom that China is an expansionist aspiring hegemon that wishes to recreate a Middle Kingdom order that would reduce smaller neighbors to tributaries and vassals and banish the US from the Western Pacific. This may accurately characterize the desires of fringe ultranationalist hawks who are as unlikely to capture the Chinese state as Japan’s are to capture the Japanese state, but there is no evidence that it accurately describes the intentions of the current Chinese leadership, whose external behavior provides better evidence of a sense of insecurity than of arrogance. Chinese leaders very clearly feel caught between domestic and international pressures, and worry very much more about the former than the latter. Even if they did have the inclination to dominate, they would not have the luxury.

Similar misunderstandings complicate Japan-South Korea interactions. Japan and South Korea are two countries that should enjoy friendly, constructive, co-operative relations. They share a wide variety of common important interests, and are on the same side of all important regional security issues, including North Korean nuclear weapons, the rule of law, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the value and importance of the US role in the region.

And yet, trust between them is in shockingly low supply. Again, the problem is a lack of empathy. As my colleagues and I have found, South Koreans interpret Japanese policy through a particular lens in which Japan is unrepentant of its colonial past and refuses to treat South Korea as an equal. For this reason, the useless islands dispute poisoning Japan-South Korea relations — the dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima — takes on existential significance in the Chinese-moves-south-china-sea.

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