GLOBAL ASIA Cover Story The Politics of Trust

From Enmity to Amity: Trust’s Part in US Foreign Policy

By Charles A. Kupchan

‘In God We Trust’ is the slogan on the US currency, but the history of American foreign policy shows that the US has placed its trust in things other than the divine to secure its role in the international order, especially in terms of its strong transatlantic relations.

In Northeast Asia, however, a trust deficit persists, not just between Washington and some regional players, but also between Asian countries themselves, writes Charles A. Kupchan.

IN HIS FIRST INAUGURAL address, US President Barack Obama informed those regimes "on the wrong side of history" that the United States "will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." This bold offer was Obama's opening gambit in his signature effort to pursue rapprochement with America's long-standing adversaries. The new turn in US policy led to a much touted "reset" with Russia (that recently has become "unset"), helped transform relations with Myanmar and produced progress, albeit halting, in ties to Cuba. Obama's readiness to talk to adversaries has not yet borne fruit with Tehran, but it is the basis for Washington's efforts to find a negotiated solution to the stalemate over Iran's nuclear program.

Although not explicitly stated, Obama's pursuit of rapprochement with America's foes can be seen as an effort to advance international stability through trust-based co-operation among nations rather than competition based on the logic of power balancing. And even though critics on the right have attacked him as "the great appeaser and the groveler-in-chief," in the words of conservative commentator Michelle Malkin, Obama is not an isolated, starry-eyed idealist in pursuing this agenda. Indeed, despite America's reputation for deploying hard power in the service of maintaining hegemony, the US has actually been one of the modern world's main purveyors of a transformational, trust-based brand of international politics.

The US came slowly to this vocation. The country's Founding Fathers warned against "entangling alliances" in favor of impartial relations with all countries. In his Farewell Address of 1796, President George Washington, in a speech that came to guide US statecraft for much of the 19th century, effectively dismissed the notion of a trust-based foreign policy. "There can be no greater error than to expect, or calculate upon, real favors from nation to nation," Washington insisted. The result was a grand strategy of self-isolation. Americans concluded a military pact with France in 1778 to advance their fight for independence from Great Britain. After winning its freedom with French help, the US promptly proceeded to renge on that pact, refusing to come to France's aid after it went to war against Britain in 1793. Indeed, not until the Second World War — some 160 years after its pact with France — was the US again ready to take on the burdens of a military alliance. In the interim, the US trusted only itself.

The Second World War and its aftermath marked a dramatic shift in American grand strategy. The US switched to a policy of global engagement aimed at not just defeating adversaries, but also transforming them into stable democracies. Autocracy and economic nationalism were the main causes of war; democracy and free trade were intended to serve as the needed antidotes. The ultimate objective was to integrate like-minded states into a liberal order bound together by common values and interests. Through domestic political convergence and institutionalized economic and strategic co-operation, liberal democracies would come to form a "security community" — a grouping of countries within which the prospect of armed conflict would be unthinkable. Nations would come to trust one another despite the inescapable uncertainty of global politics. Peace would prevail in such security communities because member states had come to believe in the benign intentions and character of their partners.

BUILDING TRUST ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

The transatlantic arena is the main theater in which this transformational approach to international politics came to life. The trust-building enterprise began in 1896, when the US and Great Britain embarked on a diplomatic process aimed at resolving the many outstanding issues that continued to fuel mutual hostility. Britain was motivated by the need to reduce burdens in the Western Hemisphere in order to focus on rising threats elsewhere, and the US welcomed the opportunity to expand its sway in its own neighborhood. By engaging in reciprocal acts of accommodation over borders, fishing rights and other matters, the two powers were able to gradually turn enmity into amity.

By the early 1900s, American and British officials were openly declaring the beginning of a close friendship. Based in part on their shared Anglo-Saxon identity, elites in both countries began to view conflict between the two nations as tantamount to fratricide or civil war. In 1904, a high-ranking British official declared an Anglo-American war to be out of the question: "I cannot conceive that any British statesman is willing to contemplate it under any circumstances." The following year, US President Theodore Roosevelt confided to a British colleague that, "In keeping ready for possible war I never even take into account a war with England. I treat it as out of the question." In 1906, the British withdrew their last contingent of soldiers from Canada, effectively leaving the border with the US undefended. Over the course of roughly a decade, trust had broken out between two historic enemies.

With the Anglo-American partnership as its foundation, a transatlantic security community spread to continental Europe during the Second World War and the Cold War. Through its wartime and peacetime presence in Europe, the US played an important role in making possible this
enlargement of the Atlantic community. The Soviet threat not only ensured that US forces remained in Europe, it also facilitated regularized transatlantic co-operation through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). At least as important in building trust was the project of economic and political integration launched by the Europeans themselves. France and Germany bound together their coal and steel industries, and fashioned a treaty-based system of governance with their smaller neighbors. Germany held itself accountable for its dark descent in the Nazi era. Coupled with the transparency afforded by democratic rule, integration nurtured trust-based co-operation within the European Community, which was tethered to North America via NATO.

The maturation of a security community among the Atlantic democracies is one of the most significant geopolitical revolutions of modern times. That the Atlantic Alliance has long outlasted the end of the Cold War and persistent transatlantic differences over policy is a sure sign that it has evolved into a marriage of trust, not one of mere convenience. Although the Atlantic security community succeeded in expanding into Central Europe after the demise of the Soviet Union, it has had notably less success in incorporating Russia. Indeed, the reset in US-Russian relations achieved during Obama’s first term has been reversed since Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin. The deterioration in relations was on full show this past summer, when differences over Syria, missile defense, the demise of the Soviet Union, it has had notably less success in expanding into Central Europe after the

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The legacy of the Cold War still weighs heavily on US-Russian relations. Instead of practicing mutual accommodation, Washington and Moscow have found themselves in an adversarial tit-for-tat, undercutting hopes of building a more trust-based relationship. The reset may not be over for good, but it is certainly stuck for the foreseeable future.

TRUST IN NORTHEAST ASIA: THE MISSING INGREDIENT

In comparison with US policy toward Europe, the place of trust in American strategy toward Northeast Asia has been far more sparing. Washington has built strong bilateral alliances in the region. But the enduring ties with individual allies such as South Korea and Japan fall short of the trustful, taken-for-granted bonds that have emerged across the Atlantic. Moreover, while the US has been a strong backer of the European Union, it has quietly discouraged similar regional integration in East Asia. To be sure, the US presence has been a major source of stability in Northeast Asia since the end of the Second World War but trust, the main ingredient of a stable peace, has been remarkably absent.

There are multiple explanations for the missing role of trust in US strategy toward Northeast Asia. For starters, although there is strong domestic support for strategic reliance on the US in South Korea and Japan, the American presence also faces an undercurrent of popular resentment. The issue continues to roll the politics of Okinawa; base negotiations are a persistent source of tension between Tokyo and Washington and opposition to the US presence in South Korea has prompted US forces to ratchet down their profile. The uncertainties of domestic politics may make Washington less inclined to invest in trust-based co-operation of the sort it has pursued in Europe — whose population, despite occasional bouts of anti-American sentiment, has generally been worried about too little American presence, not too much.

As Peter Katzenstein and Christopher Hemmer argue in their 2002 essay “Why Is There No NATO in Asia?”, matters of identity and cultural affinity may explain why the US has invested in a security community in Europe, but not in Asia. A sense of Anglo-Saxon solidarity helped rapprochement...
between Britain and America get off the ground. During the formative years of the Cold War, the American population was primarily of European extraction (especially true among the foreign policy elite), helping a sense of solidarity born of cultural commonality spread to the broader transatlantic community. The absence of such cultural commonality could be a factor inhibiting trust in the transpacific community. If so, it may be that the growing diversity of the American population may open opportunities for more trust-building across the Pacific in the future.

A third factor is that Northeast Asia itself is not yet fertile ground for trust-based co-operation. Geopolitical tensions plague the region, crowding out prospects for the strategies of mutual accommodation needed to build trust. Most of the region’s states, along with the US, remain wary of China’s rise and its growing geopolitical ambition. Yet countries allied to the US and worried about China’s ascent are also distrustful of each other, making it difficult for the US to act as a catalyst for regional integration. The cancellation in 2012 of an intelligence-sharing agreement between South Korea and Japan was particularly telling in this respect. A significant part of the problem is no doubt Japan’s unwillingness to resolutely apologize for its behavior in the Second World War and hold itself accountable in the transpacific community. If so, it may be that the region’s states, along with the US, remain wary of China’s rise and its growing geopolitical ambition.

Part of the problem is that rapprochement takes time. Previous historical cases — the US and Great Britain, Norway and Sweden, Brazil and Argentina, Indonesia and Malaysia — indicate that the move from enmity to amity often takes a major breakthrough with Seoul. Should that be the case, Park would face mounting domestic pressure to toughen her stance — exactly what happened to Obama and his outreach to Russia. Part of the problem is that rapprochement takes time. Previous historical cases — the US and Great Britain, Norway and Sweden, Brazil and Argentina, Indonesia and Malaysia — indicate that the move from enmity to amity often takes the better part of a decade, if not longer. Today’s parliaments and publics, however, want quick results, denying leaders the time they need to guide adversarial relationships toward trusting ones. Park’s trustpolitik risks becoming a casualty of political impatience.

In Japan, Abe’s nationalist brand of politics is poised to ensure that Tokyo does more to exacerbate than alleviate the region’s trust deficit. His unhelpful stance on matters of historical accountability seems rooted in ideology rather than political instrumentalism, suggesting that it is unlikely to change. And the Chinese government is ready to play the nationalist card whenever it needs to shore up domestic support — which is all too often. If China’s economy slows and corruption scandals continue to plague the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, Beijing may increasingly rely on a muscular foreign policy to pave over domestic discontent.

With the US in retrenchment mode, Washington may be a somewhat detached bystander as Park feels her way forward. To be sure, the US will be present and accounted for, but with Obama struggling to extract America from the Middle East and focus his efforts on the home front, a push toward a new trust-based politics for Northeast Asia will have to come from within the region itself.

The ball is now in President Park’s court. Trustpolitik holds enormous potential. History makes clear that peace does break out — and that trust is an essential ingredient when it does. But she also faces a daunting task in a region in which trust has been a very scarce commodity for a very long time.

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