TRUST IS A CENTRAL CONCEPT and major concern in domestic and international politics. At the international level it almost invariably involves judgments about other actors: Will they prove faithful allies? Will they adhere to their treaty and other commitments? Do they have benign intentions? These questions are critical, but surprisingly little research has been carried out on how policymakers reach these decisions. Trust also has a wider application to international relations than is generally recognized because it is central to the confidence that policymakers have in their judgments, the efficacy of their initiatives and their ability to bring these initiatives to fruition. This confidence is often misplaced.

These understandings of trust are related, because the confidence of leaders in their own judgment and skills not only influences their assessments of others’ intentions, but also the certainty they have in those assessments. The Greek historian Thucydides explores this relationship at some length in his account of the Peloponnesian War. He attributes the catastrophic decisions made by Athens to hubris and elpis (hope). The Athenian generals Pericles and Alcibiades exaggerated their ability to understand and control others and became correspondingly insensitive to looming catastrophes. Historians and biographers have used this theme in writing about such figures as Napoleon, Franklin Roosevelt, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lyndon Johnson. International relations theorists on the whole remain mute on the subject, however, perhaps because they downplay the role of agency in favor of structural theories.

Where does trust come from? Deterrence and strategic choice assume that it depends on the prior performance of actors on the interests at stake. Psychological and political research indicates that we feel more positive about people who resemble us, or who have balanced features, are tall and are not overweight. We are more likely to trust and vote for such people. The writings of Thucydides and modern research in motivational psychology both suggest that the wish is the father of the deed; to the extent we need to trust in someone, some elite, organization or state, we are likely to do so regardless of evidence to the contrary.

Thucydides, Sophocles and Plato offer a more fundamental explanation to do with friendship. The first and last explanations invoke learning as their mechanism, although in different ways.
For deterrence and strategic choice it is past performance that counts. For the ancient Greeks, friendship builds a generalized form of trust that extends to all areas of activities. Violations of trust in any domain, in turn, undermine it in all others. Thucydides, Sophocles and Plato encourage us to think about the ways in which society and trust are co-constitutive and how each makes the other possible. We cannot understand trust by extracting actors from the societies in which they live and function. Rather, we must understand how their social context shapes their behavior and expectations. Societies of every kind depend on trust, and its breakdown is a fundamental cause of civil and foreign wars. By contrast, deterrence theory and realist models of international relations assume that trust is in short supply, the anomaly rather than the norm.

**TRUST AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY**

Social scientists generally define trust with respect to a particular behavior. According to Henry Farrell and Jack Knight, trust is “a set of expectations held by one party that another party or parties will behave in an appropriate manner with regard to a specific issue.”

Mark Suchman notes that trust is built by repeated compliance with rules and established expectations for behavior.

I prefer to frame the problem of trust from the macro perspective of society. In family life, domestic politics and international relations, anywhere that human beings interact, predictable behavior is essential. We assume that everyone will drive on the same side of the road. In the absence of this assurance, driving would be hazardous, insurance rates would be exorbitant and many fewer of us would venture onto a highway. We take it for granted that everyone will follow this rule because of obvious self-interest. The principal violators are drunken drivers — people no longer restrained by reason — and, for a while, illegal immigrants in southern California who would race up the highway in the face of oncoming traffic in the hope of escaping the Border Patrol.

Behavior that is self-serving and socially mandated is generally not problematic. People act in accordance with norms of this kind so regularly that their performance becomes habitual. This in turn makes their actions more predictable, heightens trust by others and contributes to the stability and efficiency of the social order. Trust becomes problematic in situations where there are no norms or weak norms, and where actors have not been successfully socialized into conforming to them, or their violation promises great rewards.

Realists describe the international system as anarchical without any embedded norms. They nevertheless recognize that trust lies at the core of strategies to deter and compel certain behaviors when dealing with friend and foe alike. Target states must believe that you will carry out your threats if they fail to act as you demand. For deterrence theorists, success depends on communicating threats effectively and making enforcement credible. Since reputation is considered the principal source of trust, credibility depends on a reputation for defending past commitments.

Realists further assume that “crime pays.” Extortion, invasion and cheating in arms control or trade agreements can confer significant advantages. During the Cold War, opposition to arms control agreements with the Soviet Union was driven by the belief that Moscow would secretly augment its arsenal and somehow derive a significant strategic advantage from such cheating. US President Ronald Reagan’s signature phrase “Trust, but verify” became a catchword for American conservatives. This oxymoron reflects the belief that agreements can be valuable but are rarely self-enforcing and require careful monitoring.

Why would leaders negotiate and sign agreements they have no intention of following? We can imagine several conditions in which this might occur. Leaders might do so under duress and hope to wiggle out of and escape their commitments later under more favorable circumstances. Following the First World War, the Weimar Republic had little choice but to sign the Versailles Treaty, but violated key provisions of it regarding the size of its army and its weaponry as soon as it could get away with it. Circumstances can change, making freely negotiated agreements no longer appear to be good deals. Korea, to end the fighting in Indochina, the United States signed an accord in Geneva in 1954 in which North and South Vietnam were established, awaiting unification in 1956 following an election. But Washington and its ally South Vietnam refused to hold the election when the time came, because they recognized that the communists were likely to win. Agreements can also provide camouflage, making it easier to violate a commitment successfully. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev accordingly promised US President John F. Kennedy that he would not send missiles to Cuba for this reason.

**THE LIBERAL VIEW**

Given their assumption of international anarchy, realists reason that security must be the first concern of states and that no one can trust others to support them when it endangers their security. The liberal model presupposes a desire to co-operate as it is the most rational strategy for actors motivated by security or wealth. Liberals believe institutions have the potential to overcome anarchy and thus institutions are created, expand and become influential when states and other international actors consider them useful. Those who join these institutions have varying incentives to follow their norms and procedures, and to the degree that they do, compliance is largely self-enforcing.

Two kinds of trust issues arise for liberals. The first concerns agreements or institutions already in place, and the risk that actors will free-ride or defect. Both kinds of behavior may be advantageous to individual actors but detrimental to the common interest. Defection and free-riding undermine trust, making it less likely that actors who behave this way will be invited to participate in other institutions. The second concern is the difficulty of creating agreements and institutions, often called the problem of the commons. The possible costs and risks of taking the first steps toward co-operation constitute a significant deterrent. Liberals believe that institutions reduce these costs, as does the existence of a hegemon with the power and authority to coordinate behavior and punish defectors.

**A THIRD APPROACH**

Constructivists offer understandings sharply at odds with realists and liberals. They direct our attention to the underlying causes of co-operation, not to individual cases of it. According to Christian Reus-Smith, “All political power is deeply embedded in webs of social exchange and mutual constitution — the sort that escapes from the short-term vagaries of coercion and bribery to assume a structural, taken-for-granted form — [and] ultimately rests on legitimacy.”

Martha Finnemore and Stephen T. premium spell out the implications of this approach. They argue that domestic and international law are social phenomena deeply embedded in the practices, beliefs, and traditions of societies. To understand compliance and defection, one must determine the congruence of law, custom, rule or agree-
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to worry about their ability to satisfy their goals or even to guarantee physical security. Security then becomes the overriding motive, and fear the dominant emotion. Co-operation extends only to actors with similar fears, because they face the same perceived threats. Trust among actors will be low, even when their level of co-operation is high. Consider the relationship among the Big Three during the Second World War. The US provided Lend-Lease aid to Britain and the Soviet Union and the leaders of the three countries met periodically to hammer out military strategy and postwar occupation policies. Their relationships, however, were marked by distrust — between Britain and the US and between the Anglo-American powers and the Soviet Union. This led to an East-West Cold War soon after the defeat of the axis powers.

THE DOWNSIDE OF TRUST

Justice and legitimacy are closely connected to trust. Trust is the expectation that others will honor their promises and the rules to which they have agreed. Political orders, like their economic counterparts, rely on a high degree of trust, as many critical relationships find expression in sequential rather than simultaneous behavior. Trust rests on the principles of fairness and equality. It involves reciprocity, an expression of fairness and equal treatment of agents, regardless of other inequalities among them.

Elites everywhere try to justify their power and wealth and often succeed in generating trust and respect for themselves. The more the demos trust the elite, the more the elite can exploit them, leading to more unjust political, economic and social orders. The less faith the demos have in elites, the more they are likely to hold them accountable to relevant principles of justice. Too much trust undermines justice and order while too much distrust can be disruptive. In practice, we must balance the needs of order and those of justice, and this requires a healthy degree of distrust, but not so much as to encourage total alienation.

Building on this understanding, James Madison wrote in Federalist No. 51: “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.” The same holds true for regional and international orders. Governance invariably requires some hierarchy, and with it, privileged elites. Power invites abuse and too much popular faith in elites encourages abuses of power and exploitation.

The authors of the Federalist Papers nevertheless felt the need to put their trust in some group if the American political system were to function effectively. They portrayed the educated, affluent elite as people with the potential to subjugate the People’s Republic of China, India and other non-aligned states put their trust in economic development, as did, for the most part, other ex-colonial countries.

Realists, by contrast, respect the powerful and claim to see the world as it is and not through rose-tinted glasses. They believe, despite the contradictory evidence, that the US is a hegemon. Realists and liberals alike are committed to preserving their country’s supposedly pre-eminent position in the global system, describing the US as “exceptional and indispensable” to the system’s stability. They ignore all the ways in which the US fails to live up to the responsibilities of hegemony and attempts to exploit its economic and military power to advance parochial ends, often to the detriment of stability in the international economic and political order.

BUILDING TRUST

My examination of trust suggests several conclusions. The first is a close connection between trust and co-operation. The latter is certainly possible without the former, but it is greatly facilitated by it. Sustained co-operation, whether bilateral or institutional, requires a high level of trust. Second is the source of trust. As the ancient Greeks understood, it comes from friendship and a willingness to do things for friends that have nothing to do with one’s own goals. Treating personal friends, elites and countries as ends in themselves, not means to our ends — to borrow the words of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant — builds trust and facilitates co-operation, which in turn builds common identities and more trust.

What are the implications for international relations theory? My short review indicates that it is hardly objective in the sense of being detached from the subject it purports to study. International relations paradigms and theories are expressions of intellectual and political projects and theorize trust in manners consistent with and supportive of them. We should not trust them, but approach their claims with cynicism.

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