

## **Review - Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflict**

Written by Carina van de Wetering

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CARINA VAN DE WETERING, JUN 25 2018

### ***Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflict***

**By Nicholas Wheeler  
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It is a momentous time for trust and distrust within the field of International Relations. Since interstate tensions have shown a renewed upsurge, the question is how can we reverse volatile relationships. As an indication of the topic's importance, Nicholas Wheeler's book even mentions the developments between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un. However, Wheeler does not focus on individual leaders per se, but he is interested in establishing a theoretical framework on trust building which takes more seriously the interpersonal interaction of leaders. He rightly criticises the incorrect assumption made by the trust literature that in order to jumpstart a peaceful relationship actors can signal their peaceful intent to each other at any time (p.1). In fact, Wheeler initially advanced the possibility of trust building through a "leap in the dark" by expressing a dramatic gesture (Booth and Wheeler 2008, pp. 232-234). Now he is emphasizing face-to-face communication between leaders to initiate interpersonal trust. Thus, the book is an accumulation of insights regarding personal bonds as discussed by Wheeler over the last decade.

In order to set up the framework, Wheeler presents a multilayered approach to trust building by drawing insights from different sections within the trust literature. Maturing as a research avenue within International Relations, the literature is mostly located within three different approaches: rationalist, social psychological and social constructivist perspectives (Ruzicka and Keating 2015; Haukkala, van de Wetering, Vuorelma 2018). Wheeler tries to bridge all three approaches in reference to Robert Jervis' work on perceptions and images. For instance, Wheeler discusses that a situation of no trust means that the actors are rational egoists who have enemy images of the other country.

Wheeler also includes other elements of these theoretical approaches in his further conceptualization of trust. When trust is formed, there is initially the presence of calculative trust which may eventually lead to bonded trust. For calculative trust, actors expect that they will not be harmed based on a risk calculation (p.4). With bonded trust, the actors undergo a transformation of identities and interests. It is at this point that "two leaders are so secure in their trust with each other that neither calculates the risks of defection" (p.8). This is the highest form of trust building or "the mental state of trust as suspension" in which actors dismiss threats (p.8). It is still possible that one betrays the other, but it is not factored in (pp.71-72; 161; 183).

One of the most important aspects of the book is the process of bonding. In an elaborate discussion, Wheeler argues that leaders are able to perceive each others' intent, integrity and ability as part of his/her trustworthiness (pp.4-6). What serves as a trustworthiness index are verbal and non-verbal behaviors expressed by these actors during a face-to-face encounter. The process of bonding manifests itself through the positive identification of each others' interests and a sense of seeing the other as a human being, or "the human factor" as mentioned by Mikhail Gorbachev, a source of Wheeler's inspiration (pp.51-52). One precondition to this process is the actors' enactment of a "security dilemma sensibility" through which they gain an intuition for whether the other has an aggressive or peaceful intent (p.54).

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## A fickle relationship

Of course, the above is all based on whether these leaders interpret the signals of the other correctly. There is the fear of being in the wrong. Here lies one of the strengths and weaknesses of Wheeler's book. As Wheeler discusses, various authors within trust research, including rationalists, show great interest in signaling theory by which actors can indicate their trustworthiness to each other when they have peaceful intentions (pp.100-117). The problem is that misinterpretation can take place (pp.9-12). Wheeler's framework circumvents this, because he finds that neuroscientist and psychological research views people as excellent judges of trustworthiness in face-to-face situations. Wheeler does argue that the neuroscientist research on imitation, such as mirroring neurons during face-to-face interaction, is still in its infancy (pp.54-55). Nevertheless, people make an assessment within a fraction of a second after they consciously process this to create an index (p.54).

The immediate test case that comes to mind is British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's apparent deception by Hitler. Wheeler sees it as a case "fiercely debated by historians", but he could have tackled it more in depth because it is so essential to his framework (p.2). Neuroscience and psychological research cited by Wheeler indeed delved into the case, demonstrating that Chamberlain seemed to have either assessed Hitler's intentions as sincere or mirrored Hitler's emotions but did not take this to its logical conclusion (Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012; Holmes 2013). On the basis of the case, Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo even warn leaders to be "cautious" to trust their personal impressions (2012, p.527). There is thus room for error by leaders. Since interpersonal trust theory has predictive power with regard to the actors' relationship, it makes us wonder under what conditions error may be possible as part of interpersonal trust theory? (p.274) This could be contextual factors rather than psychological ones by giving meaning to the verbal and non-verbal index, because leaders' thinking cannot easily be isolated from their context.

It also makes us wonder how important interpersonal trust is? What is the aim of a trusting relationship exactly? Is it about a trusting relationship between leaders or between two countries? One could argue that it is about creating a spark through interpersonal interaction which leads to further trust amongst countries. However, Wheeler's analysis of his case studies does not seem to show the latter development as clearly. He discusses three different case studies which are rich in detail, including the Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan nearing the end of the Cold War, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his Pakistan counterpart Nawaz Sharif at the end of the 1990s, and President Barack Obama and Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 2008-2009. However, the case studies show how trusting relations amongst leaders are difficult to initiate and especially to maintain. For instance, as Wheeler notes himself, it is striking that trust amongst Vajpayee and Sharif only emerged at their third meeting (pp.198-201; 291). With regard to Reagan and Gorbachev, it eventually ended up in a trusting relationship, even though it seemed that Gorbachev was really going out of his way. Nevertheless, Vice President George Bush Sr. was less trusting toward Gorbachev when he became President (pp. 178; 279). In fact, other actors within government often showed disagreement with their leaders' stance within the separate cases.

The question becomes, how we can retain the initial spark? The established trusting relations seem to be quite fickle. That is unfortunate since trust research wants to demonstrate that even if one accepts that there is a condition of anarchy in global politics, as realists and some other approaches contend, trusting relations are still an important factor. The analysis of trusting relations has been ignored for too long. However, Wheeler's book shows paradoxically that a trusting bond is somewhat uninteresting because it is based so much on the relationship of two actors which may not travel well for the predecessors or other administration officials (pp.274-275). Wheeler also acknowledges that actors cannot be entirely sure about the future, but at least bonding leads to much less defection.

In one section of the book, he finds that there is some value in creating a security community to hold onto a trusting relationship. With reference to Franco-German reconciliation in the 1960s, he briefly mentions a process of bonding amongst the leadership which led to a friendship treaty and became habitualised through a culture of trust that spread to the public. Here calculation and psychology did not play a role anymore (pp.125; 278-279). However, the case studies above show that administration officials are not always that easily convinced, therefore the process of moving from a personal bond to trust amongst governments needs more specification. Of course, calculative trust is also still present. However, calculative trust does not seem to capture how we experience trust. As Torsten Michel claims, strategic or calculative trust is not really trust at all, but everyday decision-making to take a risk to rely on

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another. He argues that trust manifests itself through the belief that the other can be trusted on the basis of how they should morally behave (2012, pp.878-879). This all leads to the question: Why bother to engage in interpersonal trust as a leader?

## A role for constructivism

To tackle some of these aspects, the book could have taken on more constructivist insights. Wheeler argues that constructivism does not focus enough on initial trust building, similar to other approaches. By often blurring boundaries between the collective (the state) and the individual (leader), it does not recognize face-to-face interaction of the personal dimension as a causal mechanism of trust (pp.126, 134). However, I would suggest that it is the way to move from relatively fickle trust between two leaders to more strengthened relations amongst states and other domestic actors. One could think of leaders as “boundary spanners” by representing their country and seeing the people as having a shared belief about a country. As trust entrepreneurs, these boundary spanners can influence public discourse and they can create the institutional framework for further cooperation (Brugger, Hasenclever and Kasten, 2013, p.444; Brugger 2015, pp.83-84). Also, discourse can enable a spark between leaders. As mentioned, leaders need to engage in empathetic understanding about the other’s motivations gained through “security dilemma sensibility” which is, arguably, contextually based by interpreting the situation that the leader believes their counterpart to be in (p.77).

As an avenue for further research, discourse is thus of interest through the shared beliefs on identities, practices and emotions which makes possible a trusting relationship (Wetering 2018, pp.64-68). It connects concerns of the leaders with the state, its government and the citizenry. Also, it creates acceptance amongst citizens and government officials, while allowing discordant voices to be more easily ignored. It would be interesting to find out whether the leaders’ increasingly trusting relationship was accompanied by other discursive changes within the rest of society. For instance, Wheeler writes that after several meetings Sharif suddenly said publically that Vajpayee was very welcome to take a bus ride to Pakistan in February 1999 (Wheeler 2018, pp.201-202). But Wheeler also makes use of the writings of American diplomat Strobe Talbott who observed a change of mood within India: In January 1999 Pakistan’s cricket team was playing in India (after a delay of twelve years) during which Pakistan’s team received a standing ovation by the public after they won a match (Talbott 2004, p.52). The role of discourse could thus be further analysed.

To conclude, Wheeler has written an interesting account on how to initiate trust building on the basis of different theoretical insights. However, it is not yet complete as a stand-alone theory, because there remain several questions to be answered. As he himself mentions, for the Iran 2015 nuclear deal, interpersonal trust “was an enabling condition of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, but it was not a sufficient one” (p.286). There are indeed other factors, such as discursive understandings that could help to enable trust building, which can be more fully explored.

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