Does Cooperation at the International Level Require Trust?

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Trust is a valuable though elusive concept in the realm International Politics because it enables actors to minimize the main feature of this realm: uncertainty. The absence of a supranational hierarchy, or world government as it is often coined, makes uncertainty an inevitable condition. This essay will hold that trust is needed; not only to establish fruitful cooperation but also to transcend this uncertainty. In addition, the argument will be made that trust alone, however, will not suffice. By examining the case of the Oslo Talks in 1993, I will argue that a general form of trust, courageously employed by the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, was not embedded in institutional cooperation. More so, it was the absence of such institutional embedment that explains both the success and the failure of these negotiations. It exposes the mutually assuming relation between cooperation and trust and thereby prevents any conclusive answer to the central inquiry of this essay.

Cooperation and Trust: Chicken or the Egg?

When asked if he trusted Yasser Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said: “I don’t know what it means to trust. He is the Palestinian leader, not the Israeli leader, and he is determined to do whatever he can to achieve Palestinian objectives. The real question is not whether we trust him. The question is whether there is a potential agreement that could be better overall for both sides, a win-win, not a zero-sum game.”[1] Aiming at cooperation, trust is of lesser importance to Barak. Largely shaped by the long-running conflict with the Palestinians, Barak argues that every state leader is representing the interests of his state and, like him, will protect these “objectives” at any cost. In order to disentangle this conflict, these interests should not be neglected. On the contrary, by mutually respecting each other’s interests, one should look for a “potential agreement” that will benefit both parties.

But why is Barak so determined to reject trust? According to Andrew H. Kydd, trust is the “belief that the other side is trustworthy, that is, willing to reciprocate cooperation, and mistrust as a belief that the other side is untrustworthy, or prefers to exploit one’s cooperation.”[2] In order to cooperate, Kydd argues, some form of trust is necessary. He rightly stresses the necessity and value of trust in cooperation. When states cooperate, they require some form of trust he tends to say. But what is this trust? Before addressing the relationship between trust and cooperation any further, it is necessary to define what exactly trust is. I tend to agree with Lars Svendsen who describes trust as follows: “To act on the basis of trust is to act as if a given rationally predictable future will come about, but without having carried out predictions on a completely rational basis.”[3] Although he is referring to trust among individuals, this definition can be applied easily to International Relations, in the sense that it concerns uncertainty. At the heart of the anarchic realm of International Relations lies uncertainty, such as uncertainty about the intentions of other actors. There are different ways to cope with this uncertainty. Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler justly claim that this fundamental condition can never be escaped. But this does not imply that, in some cases, it cannot be transcended.[4] Trust decreases “transaction costs”[5], as Francis Fukuyama states. We can move beyond calculations and predictions about the intentions and behaviour of others.

So, how are we to look at the relationship between trust and cooperation? Is trust a necessary condition to engage in cooperation? Our optimistic conviction of trust as a way of overcoming uncertainty is challenged by the second part of Kydd’s definition. Cooperation can be exploited by less benign actors who intent to abuse our trust. What is

generally known as *future uncertainty* stresses this issue quite clearly. Its potential risks appear when the black box of the state is opened: "[E]ven when two actors are confident about each other's current intentions, neither can rule out the possibility of radical domestic changes that might alter a state's identity and interests and turn it into a foe."[6] It seems there is more to it than simply trusting the other actor in order to overcome uncertainty. We are now capable of a better understanding of why, for Barak, trust is elusive and almost undesirable. Placing unjustified trust in Arafat will make Israel susceptible to exploitation. And since it is most unlikely to gain certainty about the intentions of others in the present or in the future, the dangers of unjustified trust suddenly become severe. In order to shield our trust from the risks of exploitation, Aaron M. Hoffman will emphasise the necessity of institutions (cooperation) in order to build trust.

Hoffman: Institutionalised Trust

In *The Structural Causes of Trusting Relationships: Why Rivals Do Not Overcome Suspicion Step By Step* ***[7]*** Hoffman holds that "*trust* refers to an actor's *perception* that it may safely delegate control over its interests to other (that is, potential trustees) under certain circumstances. This perception is rooted in the belief that potential will protect the interests placed in their care even if some of their own interests suffer."[8] At first Hoffman tends to agree with Svendsen, claiming that "[a]ctors prefer trusting relationships to nontrusting forms of cooperation because the latter require more-extensive and, therefore, more-expensive monitoring devices."[9] But fostering these relationships based on trust is not an easy matter. There are two ways of achieving this; the incremental and the institutional method. The former consists of tests that require actors to choose between "the long term benefits of reliability and the short term benefits of perfidy."[10] In this step-by-step approach, actors will gradually be challenged to make choices on "increasingly important issues, until [they] are convinced that they can safely transfer control over their core interests to one another."[11]

Each test has the function of separating trustworthy actors from their untrustworthy counterparts, leading the latter to defect sooner or later during the process. The alternative is an institutional strategy, stressing the "irreducible danger of exploitation"[12]; which states will unavoidably risk in the incremental strategy. Institutions are of help here, since they are "capable of substantially reducing the capacity of actors to inflict serious injury on one another. Mechanisms (for, example voting rules) that provide actors with reliable opportunities to participate in and influence collective choice reduce the potential for domination."[13] By supplying each actor with "effective voice"[14], the risks of exploitation are limited. Additionally, state leaders are concerned with the risk of being undermined by their domestic supporters. Institutions can prevent this by "structuring cooperative relations in ways that limit the capacity of internal opposition groups to undermine their respective leaders."[15]

As an example of both approaches, Hoffman refers to the European Community. After 1957, when the Treaty of Rome was signed, he notices that the founding states eventually "implemented a series of changes to the Community's design that left them, rather than the Commission, firmly in control (…)."[16] How can this shift in intentions be explained? According to Hoffman, it seems states were never really interested of taking steps towards trustful relationships. They will always be inclined or have incentives to defect when they are not somehow 'locked in.' Hoffman therefore turns to institutions. In 1986 the member states signed the Single European Act, a first major revision of the Treaty of Rome. In it, each member was certified of *effective voice* by creating "a system that gave each government enough leverage over collective decisions to ensure that over the long run, EC [European Community, now European Union] would take the interests of each state into account."[17] By taking the interests of all member states into account, the fear of exploitation, underlying people like Ehud Barak's aversion of trust, can be avoided.

In short, firm institutions 'lock' states into cooperation and prevent them from losing influence on collective decisions (*effective voice*) while allowing them to make decisions without the loss of domestic support (*breathing space*). By urging that institutional cooperation is a means to enable relations of trust without the risk of being exploited, Hoffman is entangling the problem of *future uncertainty*. He opens the black box of the state and puts an institutional approach forward that minimises the risks of domestic opposition.

A considerable problem with this argument however, is the issue of rational egoism. Like Barak, many political actors

as well as scholars have argued that states cooperate out of their own interest. This rational account of trust building unfortunately contains the seeds of its own destruction, for actors will only cooperate as long as it benefits their national interests. Referring to Marin Hollis, Booth and Wheeler state that "rational egoists (…) can never give up the chance to exploit others if their utility will be benefited by such action; trust requires actors to be prepared to eschew the satisfaction of their own utilities – something that is contrary to the nature of rational egoism."[18] If it is in their rational interest to defect, rational egoists will not hesitate to do so. Institutionalists, like Hoffman, will argue that states are 'locked' in institutions that prevent them from abandoning institutional cooperation when it no longer benefits their interests. But he is overly optimistic on this issue; by underestimating or even downplaying the motivation actors initially have when setting up a treaty or institution in the first place.

In *The puzzle of trusting relationships in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty* ***[19]*** Jan Ruzicka and Nicholas J. Wheeler, when referring to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), claim that, although it is often asserted that the nuclear-weapon states (NWS) had a better bargain than the non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS), "it is also indisputable that even the NWS signing the NPT have entered into a trusting relationship. By agreeing to the right of all signatories of the NPT to pursue civilian nuclear programmes (…), the NWS have accepted (…) the potential vulnerability inherent in the possibility of a state mastering the fuel-cycle and thereby becoming a 'virtual' nuclear weapon state."[20] One could say that, rather than blindly accepting the inherent dominant bargaining position of the NWS, the NNWS prevented from being 'locked' in the treaty by retaining the possibility of becoming a "virtually nuclear weapon state." This would lead Alfred Wohlstetter to establish that states could become nuclear without quite breaking the rules.[21]

Rational egoism therefore fails to deliver a definitive argument for the motivation states have to cooperate and build trust in the long run. International institutions and treaties, like the NPT, are nothing more, but also nothing less, than the embodiment of the interests of its members. As long as these institutions serve the actor's interests, they will remain part of the institution. But, as rational egoists, actors will have little hesitance to leave these institutions when their interests no longer overlap which therefore prevents them from being 'locked' into institutions in the first place; leaving the door open for an easy exit. To solve this issue, Brian C. Rathbun argued that a primal form of trust is necessary in order to achieve cooperation.

Rathbun: Generalised Trust

"Rationalist arguments have a certain intuitive appeal, but they beg the question of how states are able to come together to build institutions to solve problems of distrust without a reservoir of trust in the first place."[22] To get to the point, Rathbun argues that this reservoir of trust is essential for explaining how cooperation is achieved when he suggests "that trust, not distrust, leads to cooperation and the construction of international organizations."[23] He defines the trust that rational egoists seek and apply as *strategic trust*, and opposes this to *generalised trust*. Strategic trust largely depends on the situation and is directly aimed at the other actor. Forms of cooperation that are defined by this notion of trust will, as we have previously seen, try to cope with future uncertainty by building institutions that facilitate cooperation and supply the other actors with information on other actor's intentions. In a way, they can be related to a form of reciprocity that is specific and situational in nature; as long as our actions and trust are reciprocated, strategic trust is possible.

This, however, has some peculiar implications. For actors expect *specific reciprocity*, but this is highly unrealistic because of the nature of security cooperation, which is different from other forms of cooperation, such as economical cooperation, that do allow immediate reciprocity. Since issues do not occur simultaneously, it is impossible to expect that other actors will immediately reciprocate your trust. The reason why rationalist accounts of trust can never sustain cooperation is because their understanding of cooperation is based on distrust. Cooperation based on distrust and self-interest, such as rational egoism, can never lead to a relation of trust. Rathbun therefore seeks to overturn this relation and argues for a necessary reservoir of trust, which he labels *generalised trust*. It does not depend on specific information and does not expect immediate reciprocity but *diffuse reciprocity*, is essential to the nature of security cooperation. More so, it precedes this information. "Generalized trusters begin interactions with cooperation, even without specific information about the trustworthiness of others."[24] This does not imply them being altruistic since they will "defect in the face of consistent noncooperation."[25] It allows them to generate

cooperation in circumstances that would be unfruitful for cooperation according to rationalists. In short, Rathbun cleverly reverses the relationship between trust and cooperation. If actors wish to engage in trustful cooperation, an initial reservoir of generalised trust is crucial since cooperation based on distrust and rational calculations of interest will never 'transcend' rational egoism to establish trustful relations among actors.

As an example, Rathbun discusses the formation of the League of Nations and the United Nations after respectively the First and the Second World War. The former case is especially striking for Rathbun's argument. Even before the war, President Woodrow Wilson undertook a "crusade to establish a League of Nations around the concept of collective security."[26] But, considering the international circumstances after 1918, this would require *generalised trust* rather than *strategic trust*; resting on *diffuse reciprocity* rather than *specific reciprocity*. Wilson was aware of this: "Some of our sovereignty would be surrendered."[27] The nature of collective security required his trust to be universal and beyond borders, making Wilson not worried about opportunism or entrapment. His domestic opponents, however, did not share his optimistic stance on the implications of this form of collective security. "Conservative internationalists instead fell back on cooperation with a smaller group with whom Americans shared interest, experience, and even identity."[28] Because of this domestic opposition and the lack of two-third support in the Senate, the United States would eventually end up not joining the League.

When the United Nations was established, nearly twenty years later, lessons were taken from Wilson's failure. "[R]ecognising the need for two-thirds Senate support of a constitution for a future organization, [the Roosevelt administration] began to water down its more ambitious, qualitatively multilateral plans with an eye toward winning the support of less trusting and more unilateralist conservatives."[29] This would lead them, for instance, to implement veto power for the five permanent members of the Security Council in order to gain congressional approval. By estimating and incorporating the potential domestic opposition into the institutional agreement, the administration recognized what had happened in 1919 and was able to establish the United Nations while becoming a member of it.

Rathbun is clearly optimistic when he defines this as another application of generalised trust. But how can he frame the presence of veto power as an indication of generalised trust? This brings us to the paradox between trust/distrust and hierarchical authority. "A lack of generalized trust (…) creates a felt need for hierarchy to protect against opportunism. (…) Yet without generalized trust, state leaders cannot make such a commitment to hierarchy in the first place."[30] Rathbun tries to transcend this dilemma by stating that generalised trust is never total and therefore, even this form of trust requires institutions. A veto power was necessary because not all actors were general trustees. Unfortunately, this explanation is not satisfactory since it undermines the concept of diffuse reciprocity. General trust requires a leap into the dark, as will be discussed further on, which the Roosevelt administration was not willing to take.

The Oslo Talks: Elusive Trust

It seems the discussion concerning the consecution between cooperation and trust never succeeds in providing conclusive answers. Hoffman's argument for the necessity of states being institutionally locked in never provides an explanation for the reasons states initially have to come together and build institutions, as Rathbun correctly objects. By stressing the importance of a reservoir of generalised trust, the latter cleverly avoids the risks of rational egoism. But the world does not solely consist of generalised trustees and therefore future uncertainty and the risks of being exploited by less benign actors always lurks around the corner. Rathbun seeks to explain the necessity of a "hierarchical authority" but thereby unavoidably has to admit that there always remains a form of institutional cooperation that is necessary in order to foster trust.

A way of interweaving this mutually assuming relationship between trust and cooperation, is to define trust, according to Russel Hardin,[31] as encapsulated interest: "I trust you because I think it is in your interest to take my interests in the relevant matter seriously in the following sense: You value the continuation in our relationship, and you therefore have your own interests in taking my interests into account. That is, you encapsulate my interests in your own interests."[32] An encapsulated interest differs from the interests of a rational egoist, because a trusting actor does not merely follow his own interests, he encapsulates the other actor's interests into his own interests. This

conceptualisation of trust refers to Hoffman's notion of trust as "an actor's *perception* that it may safely delegate control over its interests to others[.]"[33] Trust is the perception, or the belief as Svendsen states, that the other actor is trustworthy when it comes to the control and delegation over one's own interests. Moreover, it is the continuation of this trustful relationship that defines the difference with rational egoism. Interests can be encapsulated in institutions; it is trust that enables the continuation of the relationship. Going back to Barak, he was right to stress the importance of a "potential agreement" but he failed to acknowledge the importance of trust to continue this relationship.

But the contrary is equally true: generalised trust will, by itself, not survive in a world of uncertainty if it is never implemented into institutional cooperation. To explain this, I will take a look at the run-up to the Oslo Accords. In explaining these Accords, Jane Corbin discusses a situation, in early September 1992, when the multilateral talks about the Israel-Palestine peace process moved from Madrid to London on the subject of economic issues. It was Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian academic, who was determined to set up a meeting between Yair Hirschfeld, the then assistant to the Deputy of the Foreign Minister of Israel, Yossi Beilin, and Abu Ala, also known as Ahmed Qurie, who was part of the Palestine delegation. From the outset it was clear that this would not be an easy matter, for both parties would be very reluctant to meet one another. For Hirschfeld, doing so implied breaking the law since Israel did not formally recognise the Palestinians and therefore were not allowed to have open contact with them. Also, this would severely compromise Beilin's position. He therefore thought of Terje Larsen, a Norwegian diplomat, as a neutral middleman.

A vital element to be considered is the fact that the formal negotiations between both parties in Washington at the time were making less progress than was expected. During their meeting, Hirschfeld and Ala therefore proposed to set up a secret and unofficial negotiation channel in Norway, which was in a unique position to facilitate these talks. They agreed on Larsen as a facilitator for these talks in Oslo. The latter constructed a cover story to secure the secrecy of the negotiations, set up meeting places, and acquired the necessary logistics in strict confidentiality by informing as little people as possible. This involved him talking severe risks that could invoke serious consequences. Also, here the circumstances are of primal essence to explain these events and especially why Norway played such a crucial role.

"If any Scandinavian government was identified with attempts to mediate in the Middle East, it was Sweden rather than Norway: for many years Sweden had enjoyed very public relations with the PLO. But in 1991 the Socialist government in Sweden was ousted and Foreign Minister Sven Anderson (…) acknowledged that the incoming Conservatives would shift their policy to a more equal footing between Israel and the Palestinians. (…) The Socialist government in Oslo was uniquely placed because it had run a carefully balanced Middle East policy for years now, and was trusted by both sides."[34]

Another important aspect and difference with the Swedish approach was that the Norwegians would present themselves as a facilitator instead of a mediator. "[They] would bring the parties together, use their good offices to promote trust and explain the difficulties each side faced to the other party."[35] Eventually, one could say, both parties came to develop some sensibility for each other's position. Norway would not actually participate as an actor in the negotiations. In a way, they would try and build trust between both parties. "[T]he most important precondition to the setting up of their secret channel was the willingness of both the Palestinians and the Israelis to approach the talks in good faith. They had to be ready to do the deal[.]"[36]

In discussing the events around the Oslo Accords in hindsight, Yossi Beilin, stressed the unique momentum in domestic Israeli politics at the time. "The elections of 1992, it must be admitted, resulted in *accidental* victory for the peace camp. (…) I sensed that this was a rare opportunity that should not be allowed to pass without leaving an indelible imprint and creating in our lives the great change towards peace with the Arab world – in the first instance peace with the Palestinians."[37] But Beilin goes even further, stating that, apart from the victory of Yitzhak Rabin's Labour Party in Israel, it was the overall international situation that provided a 'now or never' sentiment hitherto unknown. "This time, I assured myself, we are dealing with a unique combination of factors – a peace government formed by Labour-Meretz-Shas, an American administration interested in helping process along, a Russian government prepared to co-operate with the USA and no longer underwriting Arab militarism, and pragmatic Arab regimes. This was not an occasion for letting time slip by or for more shuffling of feet in dreary Washington talks."[38]

In short, all the pieces fell into place, providing the people, willing to establish peace between Israel and the Palestinians, the required momentum that was not going to occur again very soon.

Unfortunately, it would pass as quickly: in 1995 Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli fanatic who opposed the Oslo process, which would mark the brutal end of this brief moment of peace and trust. Once again, domestic features would create different circumstances when "[t]he election of the Likud's leader Binyamin Netanyahu in 1996 brought to power an individual who viewed Oslo as exposing Israel to great danger, and showed how the peace process had failed to overcome negative images and stereotypes."[39]

Conclusion

In explaining the success and failure of the Oslo talks, Booth and Wheeler relate this event to, what they define as the key properties of trust. Firstly, the initial step always is a leap in the dark in which a first step must be taken, while accepting the fundamental uncertainty of the international realm and the risks it entails. Secondly, leaders have to cultivate empathy towards each other, which the authors describe as "an effort to share and accurately comprehend the presumed consciousness of another person."[40] Thirdly, actors have to accept a dependence and vulnerability; inherently linked to the concept of encapsulated interest in which the other actor is trusted to take care of one's interests. And lastly, actors are required to have confidence in the fact that the other actor will do what is right. In other words, they have to demonstrate reliability.

The Oslo Talks succeeded in grasping the right momentum to "touch peace", as the title of Beilin's book indicates. By opening the black box of the state, the importance of domestic factors in explaining the success of the talks, such as the elections in Israel, are clarified. Even so, they also explain its failure: elections in Israel prevented the institutional embedment of the Oslo Accords. When looking at the properties of trust as stated above, all except one of the necessary elements were present: there were people willing to take a leap in the dark (Hirschfeld and Ala), they showed empathy towards each other (which was fostered by the Norwegians), and accepted vulnerability. But they failed in demonstrating reliability towards each other. Again the opening of the domestic black box clarifies this. By circumventing the official, and institutional, negotiation channel in Washington and executing these second track talks in absolute secrecy, the negotiators were capable of making immense leaps of trust but eventually came to an agreement which was not implemented institutionally at home. This strongly resembles the failure of Wilson to take domestic opposition into account when establishing the League of Nations. Although the Israeli's and Palestinians showed strong indications of generalised trust, enabled by the strict secrecy of the talks, the lack of breathing space at home made it impossible to convince their domestic adherence. Rathbun's paradox seems unavoidable: although it was the lack of institutional embedment that allowed the negotiators to show signs of mutual empathy and sensibility, it also prevented them from selling these agreements back home.

In answering the central question of this essay, cooperation requires trust in order to prevent rational egoism. This generalised form of trust however, exposes the paradoxical need of cooperation. The Oslo Talks offered the required circumstances necessary to foster this generalised trust. But, without an embedment in institutional cooperation, trust will not survive in a world of uncertainty.

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