

Notes for a talk

‘Building Trust as a Key Element in Conflict Resolution’

1st Series: Impact of Peaceful Coexistence

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Global and Perspectives on Conflict Resolution:

Emerging Conflicts and Rethinking Innovative Solutions

Conference of the University for Peace

San Jose, Costa Rica

21 September 2017

INTRODUCTION

Rector Rojas, Father Jose Cruz, Mr Mori. Ladies and gentlemen.

Pleased to be here and honoured to be on a panel with such distinguished speakers.

I applaud the initiative of the Rector and his staff in having a significant conference on a highly needed theme at this moment, in order to mark the 10th Anniversary of the highly successful Asian Peacebuilders Scholarship programme.

I have been asked to speak on trust as a key element in conflict resolution and as all will realise, it is rather a tall order with so many experts and students of this phenomenon here today.

The Basics

And of course it is not necessary to insist on the fact in a week that:

Trust is a rare commodity in human affairs in many senses. Nor is it easy to pin down conceptually, and can be seen as elusive as well.

Disappointments, negative interpretations of events, past experience in general, can work to remove trust in human affairs and nowhere is this truer than in international relations where historical memory is often so long.

Can we trust society, government, acquaintances, groupings, even family and friends at the extreme point? If intentions are unknown and consequences potentially serious, trust becomes vital. But if conflict is already there, then trust tends very much not to be present and to be difficult to find.

The realist school in international relations of course takes conflict and competition for power as the main attribute of the international 'system'. And there is plenty of evidence to support their view.

The idealistic school suggests that while the above is true there is nonetheless plenty of evidence to suggest that, especially if one works hard at it, there is an equally powerful and present attribute of international relations and that is cooperation.

This debate touches on the connected one as to whether one can truly speak of an international society, however often the term is used, since a society presumes shared interests and goals and realists often suggest that such a positive context has little to do with the world we actually live in. Indeed, some will argue that trust is actually not advisable because in a world or anarchy such as ours, it gives a false sense of security and can lead to dangerous misconceptions about others and incorrect decisions as a consequence.

The nuclear era, for optimists at least, suggested that there was such a society in at least the limited sense that all share a desire not to destroy the planet and thus there is at least some basis for the acceptance of the term. Some even suggested that trust was therefore unnecessary. What was needed was cooperation.

This is surely one of the disadvantages of the end of the cold war in that the arms control agenda has all but disappeared from its fairly central place in diplomatic affairs for so much of the previous century.

Alas, it is also necessary to understand that in international relations, as in so much of human affairs, we are far from starting with a tabula rasa.

Our relations with others are almost always dominated by historical events about which we know little or at least about which we receive interpretations that give far too little credence to the views of the other side of the question.

Feelings of having been unfairly treated in the past, of having been victims of treachery or foul play by others, of having old scores to settle, of being unjustly or improperly viewed by former rivals or enemies, cause us to be often judgemental, quick to react, excessive in that reaction, and unwilling to compromise.

Little wonder then that trust is such a difficult state to reach and such an easy one to leave behind us in the hurly-burly of political events.

Thus the challenge is often not just to retain confidence in those with whom we have to deal, or even just of building it, but rather of either:

- restoring it where it once was (the sense of having been a victim of betrayal)

- building it where it wasn't in much or even all of the past

Trust in the 'other' is almost always a question of the behaviour of both over a period

But in international relations it is also subject to:

- Long collective memories

- Passionate concern in the matter

- High levels of sensitivity to supposed wrongs (especially in democracies)

Threats and trust and/or confidence

Traditionally in international and especially military affairs threats are conceived of as existing when there is a capacity to do us harm combined with an intention to do so.

If a country is much stronger than us but friendly and with no ill intent towards us we do not usually feel threatened (although worst case planning is often considered a military necessity as well)

If a country is much weaker than us but is not friendly and we suspect it harbours ill intent towards us, we still do not feel threatened unless we are in the highly particular context of a potential surprise attack.

But if a country has a capacity to do us harm and an intention to do so, then we most assuredly feel threatened.

It is then that it may prove useful to bring down that analysis of threat to at least manageable levels by building confidence.

- either that we do not have such a capacity
- or that we do not have such an intention
- or both

The Challenge: Resolving Conflicts in such a Context

Under these circumstances, worst case planning and deeply imbedded views of wrong, long-term conflicts are not in any way easy to address. Where direct military conflict has occurred recently, and losses of loved ones and property are even more harshly and deeply felt, the matter become even more complex.

A significant literature has developed on the subject, in the years of the late cold war and since. On-going conflicts still in a military sphere have been addressed in peace process literature and latent or nemerely simmering conflicts on a wider conflict resolution basis.

In both, the building of trust has been accepted as being both central and often extremely difficult to achieve.

The best known work has been in the sphere of confidence-building measures. With such measures one attempts to change the perception of decision-makers (or even key actors or wider society) about the other's capabilities but especially his intentions.

The list of these is long (information, handling of borders, deployments, communications, weapons, contacts, functional cooperation, etc.)

But they all have this goal of changing perceptions and providing proof that one can trust the other side.

Only then will the key element be reached: the willingness to take risks in our own behaviour because we trust in the behaviour of others.

The process can be long and frustrating. It can be upset by even the smallest ill-conceived action, especially with modern press and other dangerous elements able to make the most of it in order to sell papers, increase ratings, and the like.

And democracies, for all their benefits in other areas of human existence, have proven at least as prone to distrust as other systems of government and probably, it should be admitted, more so.

All the more the search for trust, if conflicts are to be resolved, must engage our actions.