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Book Review

Trust and distrust in Sino–American relations: challenge and opportunity

by Steve Chan, Amherst, Cambria Press, 2017, 276 pp. US$35.00 (paperback)

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Deciding who to trust and how far is a matter of judgement, and poor judgement may bring dire consequences. Even the most distrustful among us must, given our inescapable interdependency, trust *someone*, making the danger of betrayal omnipresent. This makes trust and distrust eminently worth studying, certainly in our personal lives, but even more so in the affairs of nations where serious misjudgements can imperil the lives of millions.

Steve Chan, an eminent scholar of China, claims to have identified a serious gap in the scholarly literature in this area that his short, swift book is intended to address. A brief review of existing scholarship produces theoretical insights that he brings to bear on the principal focus of his book, China–US relations, where the issue of trust and distrust is of major contemporary concern. Chan acknowledges that the problem of trust is complex, partly because the field of international relations is inherently uncertain: trust today may turn into distrust tomorrow as leaderships or conditions change. Trust, he says (p. 6), should therefore be regarded as a "process" rather than an outcome (though he might better say that trust-*building* and *maintaining* is a never-ending process). Moreover, trust is not necessary for cooperation between nations (viz. Western alliance with the Soviet Union during World War II), yet it remains an important object of study because cooperation based on genuine ("strong") trust is much sturdier than that based on mere convenience.

The definition of trust Chan provides is simple, even commonsensical: "trust refers to a general confidence about another state's future intentions which are seen to be benign or at least not hostile" (p. 16). Genuine trust, he says, requires equity, parity, empathy and reciprocity, which presents a problem, absent such bases, of gauging another nation's trustworthiness. This depends importantly, says Chan, on judging its behaviour rather than its words under critical or stressful circumstances.

He identifies three levels of trust – involving "predictability", "credibility" and "good intentions" respectively – that indicate different degrees of confidence. A state's behaviour may be *predictably* cooperative purely because of circumstantial constraints which, if removed, may reveal hostile intentions. *Credibility* involves a

stronger form of trust, one governed by a state's view of the reputational damage it would suffer through defection from cooperation in an interdependent, globalised world. The more economically and politically interdependent nations are (e.g. China and the US), the more their concern to maintain mutual credibility should temper their "trust deficit" (p. 173). Finally, *good intentions* signals the strongest form of trust, when states act not on cost-benefit calculations but according to a logic of "appropriateness". For mutually well-intentioned states there is no underlying sense of "us" and "them", making the possibility of war or conflict strictly "unthinkable".

We may note that the first two of these are not forms of *trust-in-another* at all, but rather reasons for assuming one can act more or less cooperatively with people one does not, or does not quite, trust. Only the third, "strongest" form denotes real trust. For this to be realised, Chan says, the social and cultural systems of nations must become more compatible and their belief and value systems more convergent. He notes that China and the US are very far from this ideal. Progress, he says, will require mutual strategic restraint, with both nations accepting limits on the use of military force, strict observation of treaty obligations and international norms, and respect for each other's sphere of influence. Leaders of each nation should also ease pressure on their counterparts as they try to reconcile domestic and foreign challenges.

One has only to state these terms to recognise the limits of their normative force in the real world, and indeed Chan expresses little confidence that they will soon, if ever, be realised. Indeed, his stress on convergent value systems readily evokes the old liberal assumption that real trust is only possible between democracies, meaning the principal onus of adjustment must be on China. But then again, the world has moved on surprisingly since 2017 when Chan's book appeared. It is true that many countries, increasingly economically entangled with China, face fundamental issues of trust in the new would-be hegemon; but it is also true that the shoot-from-the-hip policies of the Trump administration have created unprecedented issues of trust in America, not just among Chinese but among traditional allies.

Chan draws his bow very wide across a huge range of political issues. Though matters of trust undoubtedly interweave within every political situation, the specific focus is sometimes lost in Chan's broad analyses; or, alternatively, trust is sometimes foregrounded when other, more traditional (i.e. realist) causal explanations seem more plausible. But the value of this very readable book may lie less in its detail than in the clear way it draws attention to a theme that, in the light of recent developments, seems more important than ever.