

# Confidence, Trust and Empathy in Asia-Pacific Security

Project overview, February 5, 2014 | *David A. Welch, Senior Fellow*

The Asia-Pacific region is famously home to a proverbial “alphabet soup” of associations, forums, meetings, processes, and other security governance mechanisms, and is as a result the most thickly-“governed” region of the world in this respect. And yet it is the most dangerous. The fact that tensions and the dangers of conflict are recognized to be so high despite a surfeit of security governance mechanisms suggests that there is something wrong with the way in which those mechanism are (or are not) being used. This project is premised on the idea that insecurity in the Asia-Pacific is a function not of insufficient architecture, but of low-grade communication and a lack of mutual understanding. Specifically, leaders and policy elites in the Asia-Pacific do not use key concepts systematically and do not understand them in exactly the same way, with the result that they often speak at cross-purposes. Moreover, they systematically overestimate threats. The result is that many opportunities for fruitful interaction are often squandered and reinforce, rather than reverse, vicious spirals of hostility and misunderstanding.

The Asia-Pacific is the most dangerous region because it is home to three of the world’s most dangerous flash-points—the Korean peninsula, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea—each of which implicates at least two nuclear-armed countries. One of these nuclear-armed countries is the United States, which is in the process of “rebalancing” toward East Asia, where its network of bilateral security alliances and political commitments requires it to come to the defence of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia. It is generally acknowledged also that the United States would use force if necessary to keep open vital sea lines of communication, some of which pass through contested waters.

With the exception of North Korea, East Asian countries are highly interdependent economically, which provides strong incentives to solve disputes peacefully—a fact that may help explain the hopeful sign that the region has not seen a major civil or interstate war for more than 20 years. But the risks of interstate war are not a simple function of economic cost-benefit calculation. Europe was highly interdependent economically on the eves of both World War I and World War II. The closest the world came to World War III—the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962—was, like the outbreak of World War I, almost entirely a function of misperception, misjudgment, and miscalculation. It is generally acknowledged that the danger of inadvertent or accidental conflict is significant in East, Northeast, and Southeast Asia. But it is conceivable also that leaders in the region could “rationally” calculate that the benefits of military action outweigh the costs, in no small part because of the intensity of nationalist feelings, lingering grievances, and the salience of ideational stakes such as identity, justice, and pride—stakes about which parties in contention are typically intransigent, and which are notoriously difficult to negotiate.

Interstate conflict in the Asia-Pacific represents a serious threat not only to millions of people in some of the most heavily and most densely populated countries on Earth, but to the global economy as a whole, for which the Asia-Pacific is increasingly the engine. Even if countries in the region succeed in avoiding “hot” wars, “cold” wars carry significant opportunity costs in the form of resources and cooperation that could help address a broad set of non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, food security, energy security, and humanitarian catastrophe—challenges that are at least as pressing in the Asia-Pacific as anywhere in the

world, and arguably more so.

CIGI is fortuitously positioned to make a contribution to processes of security governance in the Asia-Pacific region, for three main reasons. First, as a private Canadian think tank, CIGI is not perceived as partisan to Asia-Pacific disputes. Its status as a private institution ensures that it is not mistaken as an agent of Canadian policy; its status as a Canadian institution leverages the lingering good will Canada enjoys in the region and the welcome embrace that awaits Canadian efforts to reengage on security matters after a lengthy hiatus. Second, CIGI is both well-networked and home to relevant expertise. Third, while CIGI is a relatively small think tank with limited resources that has no choice but to be constrained in its ambitions, a project that seeks to demonstrate the feasibility and value of finding ways of increasing the quality of communication and reducing the level of fundamental misunderstanding about key players' interests, needs, wants, fears, and perceptions of others is not a particularly high-cost proposition and targets an identifiable unoccupied niche, as pilot workshops in Tokyo, Seoul and Shanghai have confirmed.

## Key concepts: Confidence, Trust, Empathy

While policymakers in the Asia-Pacific speak of improving security governance and conscientiously seek to do so, they have managed to generate surprisingly little traction. There is good reason to believe that this is because, while they use a common vocabulary, they have not attained closure on an appropriate frame. Among the two most overburdened concepts in Asia-Pacific security discourse, for example, are “confidence” and “trust,” both of which are often invoked in discussions of “confidence-building” and “trust-building.” Commonly used interchangeably, neither term is defined in either official or unofficial documents and commentaries. The degree of confusion over the meanings of these key terms is so striking that nothing recognizably resembling trust can be found even in South Korean President Park Gyuen-Hee’s recently boldly articulated “Trustpolitik.”

Pilot workshops in the region underscored the value of rendering conventional, clear, differentiated definitions of



these terms whose use can and should be actively promoted in both official and unofficial discourse.

*Confidence* should be understood as a degree of subjective certainty that one is safe from imminent conflict resting on situational constraints (i.e., the incapacity of others to pose a proximate threat through surprise or otherwise). Confidence so understood is buttressed by:

- measures that enhance operational military transparency
- prior notification of exercises or missions
- non-threatening standard operating procedures, codes of conduct, and rules of engagement
- crisis-stable force structures and deployments.



*Trust* should be understood as a degree of subjective certainty that one can count on non-violent interaction and peaceful dispute resolution resting on dispositional considerations (another’s well-meaning character or a relationship based on respect and mutual concern for the other’s wellbeing). Trust so understood is buttressed by we-feeling.

## Trust



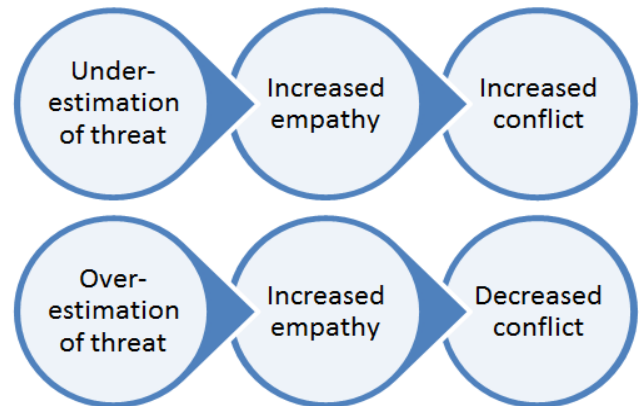
*Empathy* is not a term commonly encountered in Asia-Pacific security discourse, though one does encounter it in everyday conversation. Like confidence and trust, it is rarely clearly defined and is often used interchangeably with words such as “sympathy,” “compassion,” and “pity.” Again, it would be valuable to discipline the use of the word, restricting its meaning in such a way as to complement conventional definitions of confidence and trust: namely, as the capacity to understand another’s view of the world (i.e., “To put oneself in another’s shoes” or “To see the world through another’s eyes”)

What are the logical and empirical relationships between these three concepts conventionally defined in these ways?

- *Confidence and trust.* Confidence adds nothing to trust. Members of security communities do not need Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). However, in a context of genuine fear, transforming an antagonistic relationship into a relationship of trust will require first establishing confidence. Establishing confidence all by itself, however, will not lead to trust in the absence of empathy.
- *Empathy and confidence.* Empathy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for confidence. Un-

derstanding the mind of someone who is physically incapable of attacking adds nothing to the sense of safety from attack. However, confidence is a permissive condition for empathy. Cultivating empathy is almost certainly easier when one is not preoccupied by fear.

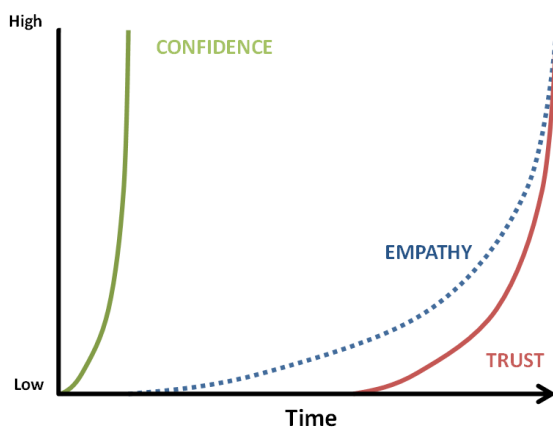
- *Empathy and trust.* Empathy is a necessary condition for trust—at least, for trust that is not misplaced. Judging someone well-disposed and reliable enough not to pose a threat requires imagining correctly that they see you in a positive light. Empathy is not, however, a sufficient condition for trust; where there is genuine antipathy, empathy will merely make it all the more apparent. While well-founded trust requires empathy, trust all by itself will not necessarily result in or sustain empathy, as scams and the shock of treachery demonstrate.



These logical and empirical relationships suggest that in the case of antagonistic relationships of the kind that we often find in the Asia-Pacific, building trust requires beginning with confidence—and confidence alone—proceeding therefrom to cultivating empathy. CBMs are useful preliminary technical exercises to increase transparency and to establish norms and procedures intended simply to reduce fears of imminent or inadvertent conflict so that serious efforts to work toward trust by building empathy can begin. These can be designed and implemented relatively quickly.

Empathy-building measures (EBMs) are designed to reduce mutual misperceptions of threat. It is safe to say that building empathy generally requires considerably more time

than establishing confidence. “Trust-building measures” (TBMs), on this view, are an empty set. Trust develops organically as parties come to know each other better, as the fear or expectation of ill will and false dealing fades away (assuming no duplicity), and as they begin to develop the kind of relationship in which the threat or use of force to resolve disputes ultimately becomes unthinkable. Since this organic process cannot begin until the obstacles to trust are cleared, which requires building empathy, one might think of empathy as the “escalator” to trust.



## Project goals

- To promote greater clarity and common use of key terms
- To establish the importance of empathy as a necessary condition of trust
- To identify practical methods of empathy building and provide theoretical and empirical justification
- To design empathy-building measures (EBMs) and demonstrate their utility
- To communicate the importance of EBMs to decision makers and encourage training and adoption at the Track 1.5, and Track 1 levels
- To identify and promulgate best practices
- To identify and promote ways of inculcating norms, procedures, and habits of empathy building in foreign and security policies and regional security governance.

## Project steps

The ideal-type sequence for reducing misperception (overestimation) of threat is as follows:

STAGE	1	2	3	4	5	6
Track 1	CBMs				EBMs →	Concrete agreements
Track 1.5				EBMs (2 <sup>nd</sup> set)		
Track 2		EBMs (Design)	EBMs (1 <sup>st</sup> set)			
Mil-Mil	CBMs					

This project would operate at stages 2, 3, and 4. In practical terms, this requires the following tasks in the following order:

1. Establishing theoretical and empirical foundations (Stage 2, above).
2. Designing a pilot empathy building exercise at the Track 2 level (participants, format, procedures, goals, venue; Stage 3, above).
3. Conducting the pilot exercise and evaluating the results.
4. Assuming a successful pilot:
  - Determining whether a follow-on Track-2 exercise (or exercises) would be valuable. The hope is that the first pilot will suffice to justify moving to Track 1.5
  - Beginning the process of identifying ways of building CTE into policy and governance
5. Designing and conducting Track 1.5 EBM(s) (Stage 4, above).
6. Preparing deliverables and communicating results (throughout, but with some capstone deliverables).

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