

Trust Lays the Foundation for Stability and Development

Interview with the security policy expert Dr. Heiko Borchert

Dr. Heiko Borchert, who is an expert on security policy and future lecturer at the University of St. Gallen, explains that the “soft factor trust” plays a decisive role in international relations. He shows how trust between countries can be created and fostered.

Marianne Frey-Hauser

“Building trust” is the motto of the WEF 2003, which for the first time has opened up to the outside world through the vehicle of the Open Forum. Can this lead to the creation of greater trust in the economic and political spheres, for example regarding the benefits of globalization?

Yes, it can. The effectiveness of this type of dialogue platform is heavily dependent upon the willingness of all involved to live up to their own motto. It will probably turn out to be a strength of the World Economic Forum that it is opening up and searching for solutions together with NGOs and groups that are critical of globalization. It is crucial that bridges are built between the separate protagonists, who often have acted in opposition to each other. Yet the importance of these conferences must not be overestimated. The persons involved will experience an interesting exchange of views and make stimulating contacts during their stay in Davos. However, when they return to the hectic daily routine, they will be confronted with their traditional thought and activity patterns. The broadening of horizons which they have experienced here normally vanishes quickly.

Activities must therefore extend beyond single events. More than a conference here an a seminar there will be needed to effect a long-term change in behavior and to close the gap between words and actions. It

will be necessary to alter the roles of the WEF and similar institutions. They will have to continue to lead the way and define new models and visions. They will also have to act in the role of a coach to support the participants and in the role of an assessor to evaluate what has been achieved and to identify corrective action and measures needed for further development.

How important is the “soft factor” trust in security matters? Is it not hard, verifiable facts that count?

There appears to be a contradiction here, but actually that is not the case. Trust is a central factor in security policy and in international relations. The presence or absence of trust determines the quality of relations between two countries. The Final Act of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, today known as the OSCE) issued in 1975, is a good example. At the height of the Cold War, the CSCE was established to contribute to preventing a war between East and West and to reduce uncertainty about the other side's behavior. To achieve this, the decision was made to “move closer together to achieve change” in military affairs among others, the “toughest” of all political areas. Measures such as exchanging information and military observers were intended to provide assurance that neither side was planning a surprise attack. This helped create transparency, which formed the basis for increased trust between the blocks. This example demonstrates that hard and soft factors cannot be separated. Soft factors are becoming increasingly important on the international states and could actually become more significant than hard factors in the long term.

A lack of trust is the root cause of many conflicts. One party distrusts or despises or hates its opponent because of differing cultural, social or religious values. How can trust arise in situations like this?

There is no magic solution to this problem, because the differences between the conflicts are too great. Nevertheless, based on historical experience it is possible to list several success criteria.

First of all, following military conflict, security and the “absence of war” are the basic prerequisites for trust between countries and a willingness to cooperate with each other. A peace-keeping force often provides this security factor. The European nations play this role today in the Balkans, acting through their joint organizations such as NATO, the EU or the OSCE.

Secondly, similar forms of government and common values help build trust. European nations today are based on democracy and the rule of law. This factor is crucial, because democracies have learned to find peaceful solutions to international disputes. They rely on a legal framework (for example constitutional norms) rather than resorting to the use of weapons. These norms also act as a barrier to the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy, because the parliament, the people and the media must be convinced that force is necessary. In keeping with the theory of democratic peace, democracies apply this domestic experience when they shape their foreign relations, and the usually behave in a peaceful manner.

Thirdly, from what has been said above, it follows that international institutions help countries adhere to the norms. They foster the creation of order, transparency and predictability, all of which are preconditions for trust.

Do these processes not fail because they take so long?

This actually is a critical factor for success, but there are no quick fix solutions for building trust.

What is the use of so-called “confidence-building measures”, which the party that is politically and militarily stronger uses to try to win over the weaker party? Are there examples where this has been successful?

The behavior of the stronger party towards the weaker party is crucial. This is demonstrated by the establishment of the post-war order from 1945 onwards, where the US played the main role. By working together with newly-founded institutions such as the UN, Washington placed restrictions on its actions. Its partners were given the opportunity to influence US policy.

It is not certain today, however, whether the US still intends to adhere to this basic consensus and to consult its allies prior to using military force. Trust in policies, in this case those of the US, depends not only on hard factors, the material resources, but also on the soft factors, the immaterial resources.

NATO was also successful in building trust after 1990, by redefining “security against each other” following the collapse of the Eastern Block as “security with each other.” Building trust in the Middle East remains difficult. Currently, not even “security against each other” exists in the region. In what is essentially an “archaic” defensive spasm, the two sides are very far from being able to work together. If the parties involved do not have the will, help from the outside to build trust must fail.

How can we expect citizens to have trust, when they see how easily corrupted people are, especially people in position of power? How can suspicion and skepticism be reduced?

We must ask for greater trust from the people, even if they have had bad experience in the past. Without trust, we would wind up with what political scientists call a “Hobbesian state of nature,” which means “war by all against all.”

The WEF Annual Meeting really can help bring about change by increasing the sensitivity to these issues on the part of decision makers. It can make it clear that be-

havior codes alone are not sufficient. The underlying values must be put into everyday practice and become something that people can experience.

This is the only way that declarations of intent such as the Global Compact can be implemented successfully. There is also a need for perseverance. Precisely because the positive effects of social and ecological sustainability are not directly evident, it is absolutely essential to have a long-term perspective.

Personal

Heiko Borchert

mf. Heiko Borchert was born in 1970. After studying International Relations at the University of St. Gallen, he worked as a research assistant at the Centre for International Studies at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich, focusing on the OSCE. The topic of his dissertation was the European security architecture. He was awarded his doctorate in 1999 at the University of St. Gallen. Heiko Borchert now heads a business and political consultancy in Lucerne. Starting in the summer semester 2003, he will be a lecturer in security policy at the University of St. Gallen.