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ESSAY

From Trust Deficits to Pervasive Mistrust: The Global Impact of US-China Rivalry

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ABSTRACT
Fostering trust in international relations is a critically important yet challenging endeavour. Over recent decades, trust deficits among states have intensified and become more widespread, resulting in a systemic condition of pervasive mistrust. The United States (US)-People's Republic of China (PRC) rivalry has played a pivotal role in generating this pervasive mistrust, as states pursue hedging strategies to mitigate their actual or potential vulnerabilities and safeguard their autonomy. A trust-building strategy is needed to counteract the detrimental effects of pervasive mistrust and bolster multilateralism in order to address critical global challenges in the 'dangerous 2020s'.

KEYWORDS
trust; mistrust; multilateralism; interest encapsulation; US-PRC

Dealing with mistrust and trust-building is never an easy task. As a product of social interaction, trust is an "endless process of acting upon expectations, which are part cognitive, part emotional, and part moral" (Barber 1983, 9). The sensitivity of 'practising' trust is a function of the high stakes involved in trusting relationships. On the one hand, trust is nothing less than a critical prerequisite for human development: borrowing from Liu Cixin's (2015) popular science fiction novel *The Dark Forest*, the ability to generate trust is what allows the breaking of the 'chain of suspicion' (*caiyi lian*) that would otherwise lead humanity down the Darwinian path of *homo homini lupus*, where might is right. At the same time, trust fundamentally involves risk: regardless of any mitigating motivational factors and optimistic emotional attitudes (Jones 1996), the ontology of trust entails a rational understanding that one's trusting behaviour may backfire.

Today, investigating trust in international affairs is even more consequential and especially challenging. Both governments and international organisations have singled out the erosion of trust among major powers (United Nations 2021, 59) as a defining trend and have noted how global mistrust appears to be deepening with the passing of time (Guterres 2024). The greater unpredictability determined by this "acute lack of trust" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023) is particularly worrisome for less influential countries that bear the main consequences of its "negative impact on [the] functioning of prominent international fora, existing frameworks,

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security regimes" (Tokayev 2023). Systemically, "growing mistrust is pulling the Global North and South apart, complicating the prospect of progress" (Banga 2023).

Because mistrust derives from both real interactions and historical memories (Gan and Mao 2007, 62), trust deficits tend not to be localised and contingent, but to generate an enduring and potentially snowballing legacy. We argue that, in the absence of sufficient international leadership to change course, the conventional wisdom whereby states should not trust each other out of sheer prudence has been gaining so much traction that decision-makers are today being confronted with an international domain no longer marred by specific trust deficits, but rather defined by a condition of *pervasive mistrust*.

The most obvious evidence of the deterioration of trust in the international domain is the renewed centrality of security alliances and minilateral formats that confine the pursuit of trust to the 'support of trusted partners' (White House 2022), instead of building bridges across major political divides. Whereas in 2002 former Cold War enemies established a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-Russia Council to promote trust (NATO 2002), two decades later the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the declining performance of global institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) coexist alongside the enlargement of NATO and the development of partnerships such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS. This shift is underpinned by the bipartisan conviction in Washington that "policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners" have mostly not succeeded (White House 2017, 3). A case in point is the People's Republic of China's (PRC) failure to abide by its commitments to the WTO and fairly compete in the trade realm. Beijing's conduct has alienated not only subsequent United States (US) governments – as evidenced by the tariffs imposed by both Presidents Trump and Biden – but also the European Union (EU). In a 2023 speech in front of Peking University students, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy flatly remarked that "trust between China and the EU […] has been eroded" (Borrell 2023). It is precisely this metastasizing mistrust in its relations with the PRC, Russia and even the US following the Trump presidency that has pushed Europe to move towards taking greater responsibility for its own security (EEAS 2024) and reassess a Transatlantic partnership that had hitherto been generally regarded as the most emblematic trusting relation in the world.

At the root of this dangerous shift lies the breakdown of trust in the world's most important bilateral relationship – that between a post-hegemonic US and a re-emerging PRC. The deepening rivalry between these two global actors is shaping an increasingly fluid international order (Mishra 2024), where competitive multipolarisation and greater heterogeneity generate perceived incentives for many countries to align with different actors at once in the economic and security domains. In other words, increasingly diffuse and entrenched hedging strategies feed uncertainty to the extent that, today, mistrust seems to have become pervasive – a defining trait of present international relations. Why this development has unfolded, what it may mean for multilateral cooperation and how to foster trust among states that favour a defensive posture are three questions that deserve to be answered in the context of the "dangerous 2020s" (Rudd 2021, 58).

The article proceeds as follows: a brief introduction to the meaning of trust and mistrust in the international domain is provided, and a specific conception of trust, inspired by Russell Hardin's (2002; 2006) definition of 'trust as encapsulated interest', is outlined; the second section is devoted to highlighting why and how mistrust can be expected to become pervasive in international politics due to the system-wide repercussions of heightening competition and escalating mistrust between the US and the PRC; the third section introduces a trust-building strategy 'for hard times', designed to enhance the prospects of multilateralism delivering on the most urgent global challenges despite the unsettling state of international affairs.

Trust and mistrust in international relations

That states should not trust each other out of sheer prudence is something of an intuitive golden rule in international relations. Why it is so, even though "trust and mistrust can make the difference between peace and war" (Kydd 2005, 3), is easy to appreciate. In a domain characterised by the lack of central authority, where no enforcement mechanisms are in place, each country must take care of itself by resorting to self-help. In this context, security becomes everyone's paramount concern and this leads to the security dilemma. Due to the uncertainty about the others' immediate or long-term intentions, all actors, even if they are security seekers, strive to enhance their military capabilities. The same precautionary logic, however, prompts the others to respond by increasing their own capacity, resulting in a spiralling arms race that increases the risk of war – the very opposite of what was originally intended. This well-established (realist) conception of how world politics works[2] explains both why mistrust is widely conceived as a structural feature of the international system and why it can truly make a difference between peace and war (Forsberg 2019, 158).

Indeed, states often refrain from trusting other states simply out of prudence. This is all the more understandable if we consider that "at root, trust refers to an actor's willingness to place something valued under another actor's control" (Hoffman 2006, 4). After all, the valued 'something' that a state may end up placing – directly or indirectly – under the control of a partner is its own security and no enforcement mechanisms protect the trustor if its trust is misplaced. However, since alliances exist (on the US-Japanese alliance as a trusting relationship, see Keating and Ruzicka [2014], 766-70) and agreements between rivals have proved workable in the past, although "verification arrangements cannot substitute for at least minimal trust in the other's good faith" (Larson 1997, 706), trust is not inherently absent from international relations. In fact, the existence of special relationships (US-United Kingdom (UK), US-Japan) alongside fraught relationships (South Korea-Japan, recently Canada-PRC) shows that the level of trust may vary significantly within the international system and through time. This observation invites us to explore why trust appears to be critically shrinking today.[3] In

[2]Given the tendency to conflate international affairs and geopolitics (Mead 2014), at this juncture it is sensible to recognise that the realist worldview has gained traction in particular with decision-makers, who could in fact find it very hard to justify basing their decisions on a different conception of world politics. The approach taken in this work is meant to engage decision-makers – including mainstream ones – in a discourse on trust and trust-building.

[3]Quite a large swathe of scholarship now focuses on trust, an often overlooked research topic in International Relations some 25 years ago. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a systematic review of the literature. For a valuable assessment of the latest research, see Ruzicka and Keating (2015).

order to address this issue, first we need to delve deeper into the meaning of trust in the international domain.

If trust is defined as "an intersubjective ideational structure that allows two or more actors to partially or wholly set aside existing risk and uncertainty in the actions of others" (Keating and Ruzicka 2014, 755), trusting is indeed possible in the international system. Even (defensive) realists make room for this prospect as long as compliance can be monitored – the 'trust but verify approach' (Rudd 2021) – and reciprocity is granted so that the problem of relative gains does not nurture suspicion with respect to the long-term effect of cooperation. However, misplaced trust can carry deadly consequences. Since states are fully aware of this risk, the conditions under which they are willing to place something they value under a partner's control is key to understanding when trust can be built in this unfavourable context and why it may eventually shrink. The basic enabling condition for trust to develop is that the other is considered trustworthy. In other words, trusting is believing that the other is trustworthy (Hardin 2002). Whatever the trustor deems valuable (often trusting relations are issue-specific), they can therefore safely place under the trustee's control. Two issues are relevant in this respect: first, how the trustee can prove that they are trustworthy; and, second, how the trustor may acknowledge such trustworthiness and open up to a trusting relationship.

On the side of the trustee, as mentioned, keeping one's word is the high road to be seen as trustworthy (Larson 1997, 710). Of course, sending this kind of signal is possible only when an agreement already exists. Besides this limit, keeping one's word is conceived as fostering mere "trust-as-confidence", that is, the trustor's belief that the trustee will reciprocate (Keating and Ruzicka 2014, 756). The crucial issue, however, is how to be perceived as trustworthy when a new agreement needs to be negotiated or cooperation started, in particular if the latter entails 'diffuse reciprocity'.[4] This sort of undertaking requires a measure of initial mutual trust to reduce the perceived specific risks so that trust can subsequently grow thanks to sustained interaction characterised by "reassuring gestures" (Kydd 2005, 15).

In order to frame trustworthiness beyond mere compliance/confidence it is helpful to refer to Hardin's (2002; 2006) definition of 'trust as encapsulated interest'. His wording suggests that an actor is believed to be trustworthy if they have included (that is, encapsulated) the interest of the trustor within their own and acted consistently by carrying out the common interest (that is, their own interest that includes the interest of the trustor).[5] Regarding the motivation behind such a move, in particular when institutional trustworthiness is concerned, Hardin (2006, 17) argues that it depends on the trustee's interest in maintaining the relationship with the trustor. Based on this belief, the trustor (rationally) trusts the trustee. However, trusting on the basis of an assessment of the trustee's interest is intrinsically problematic in the international domain because potential partners may intentionally cheat. But even if they are truthful, a reassessment of their interests can never be ruled out in a realm that encourages states to be selfish and strategic at the same time. Hence, we can assume that acknowledging the rational motivation behind

[4]Diffuse reciprocity is a defining feature of the more demanding, and delivering, form of qualitative (that is, not only nominal) multilateralism that entails considerable trust among engaging parties, as Brian Rathbun (2011) has effectively argued.

[5]Erik Jones (2012, 58) links "solidarity", in particular market solidarity, to everyone agreeing to abide by the same rules for competition. This conceptualisation of solidarity is indeed very close to trusting relations.

encapsulation – that is, the trustee's perceived immediate interest in keeping the relationship with the trustor – is not enough for the trustor to trust. If it were, all long-term inter-state relations would be trusting relations, while this is clearly not the case.

Thus, for encapsulation to perform its trust-building function, it is safe to say that it must convey that the trustee has undergone a significant and costly process that is not easy to undo. In other words, the initial interest in maintaining the relationship between trustee and trustor is relevant only in so far as it triggers a change that eventually solidifies a new substantive interest. In this understanding, the trustee encapsulates the interest of the trustor by redefining the breadth of its own interest (in most cases not a cost-free endeavour, since it may impair the interests of one or more domestic groups),[6] develops a discourse about the common interest and, finally, acts on the basis of the newly established, more comprehensive interest. Unsurprisingly, this process reduces both the uncertainty and the volatility that characterise purely calculus-based relations in a domain where the culture of mistrust is deep-rooted and the level of uncertainty is never trivial. Why this understanding of trust, based on the *social construction of trustworthiness*, is helpful in analysing the reasons behind shrinking trust will be clear once we have considered on which grounds a trustor may finally decide to place something valuable under the control of a willing trustee in the international domain.

International Relations scholars, contributing to a rich and diverse trust literature that borrows from various disciplines, have identified three general explanations of how inter-state trusting relationships may develop: (i) out of rational calculations; (ii) out of psychological disposition; and (iii) as a product of a social construction (Larson 1997; Ruzicka and Keating 2015; Haukkala *et al.* 2019). Let's take a brief look at them in turn. The first explanation considers that a trustor trusts the trustee based on the assessment of the latter's interest in carrying out the common interest (having encapsulated the trustor's interest in its own, see Hardin [2006]). Given that the interests of the others are difficult to assess and that they may change over time – for various reasons including a change in constraints or opportunities, both domestic and international, or a change of leadership – the sort of appraisal that could lead to trusting relations does not resemble a well-informed rational calculation. Factoring in a high level of uncertainty, this assessment is closer to a mostly inconclusive "probability judgment", with the added complication that "more trust is needed for large decisions, where the potential losses from betrayal would be devastating" (Larson 1997, 709). For this reason, some equate trusting with gambling (Hoffman 2002, 379). Besides the fact that the cost-benefit rational calculation approach (Forsberg 2019) has significant shortcomings in international affairs, explaining generally shrinking trust with *impromptu* independent calculations carried out simultaneously by many actors is not convincing. The presently mounting 'wave of mistrust' invites us to look for underlaying factors in order to explain why mistrust seems to be gaining ground in international relations.

Assuming that inter-state trust develops out of a psychological disposition of the trustor based on a belief about the "predictability, credibility or good intentions" of

[6]A case in point is Japan's decision to take the lead in the renegotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, after the Trump administration walked away. The decision, which eventually brought to the launch of the Comprehensive and Progressive TPP, was taken in the light of the partners interest in a trade agreement setting high standards for the regional trade, despite the opposition of the Japanese farmers.

the potential trustee (Larson 1997, 714) or "the benevolent character of others" (Rathbun 2012, 25) is not helpful either. While this insight is indeed suggestive, it concentrates only on the personal attitudes of a minority of individual leaders. If this were the case, the security dilemma – itself the outcome of a process of social construction, but very hard to undo (Wendt 1992) – would not be so crucial in our collective understanding of international affairs (Walt 2022). In the future, trustful decision-makers will hopefully remain open to trusting relations, but since these deep-rooted mental dispositions tend to be stable through time, being very little influenced by contextual factors, it is not worth focusing on decision-makers' worldview to explain presently shrinking trust. If we are looking for a way to turn the tide, it is definitely more promising to look elsewhere.

The third explanation brings us back to trustworthiness and the role it plays in trust dynamics. A trustor may develop a trusting relation with a trustee thanks to a social construction process that encompasses various dimensions explored by constructivists: shared meanings, social representations, normative beliefs and collective identity formation (Wendt 1994). In this case, trusting requires the trustor to acknowledge that the trustee is trustworthy because it acts consistently on the basis of a common interest. Resulting from a process of encapsulation of the trustor's interest in the trustee's, the common interest is wider with respect to the trustee's original national, or purely selfish, interest and reflects shared meanings and normative beliefs. For example, if the trustor's interest is that the main provisions of the UN Charter are respected, being trustworthy and, hopefully, trusted entails that the potential trustee respects them consistently and formally condemns any violations of such provisions by others, even though the national interest and/or immediate strategic calculations suggest otherwise. In this situation, the trustor expects the trustee to do so because the latter places equal value on the rules-based order.

This process does not require the development of a common identity or we-feeling[7] by the actors involved – a welcome though extremely rare occurrence – but it does entail the recognition by the trustee of the value and legitimacy of the trustor's interest to be encapsulated. The PRC's aspiration to have its 'core interests' recognised by the US suggests that such a step would be seen by Beijing as the starting point of a process of encapsulation leading the US to consistent conduct and eventually to (some) mutual trust (Wu 2011). In many circumstances the issue of US-PRC relations was framed in terms of avoiding a zero-sum game fueling the security dilemma. The often laborious and costly social process of encapsulation, confirmed by consistent discourse and conduct, in fact appears to be a much stronger foundation for a trusting *relation* than an alleged interest of the trustee in keeping the relation with the trustor. Only the ensuing trusting *relation* can lower the perceived risk of the trustor and consequently result in a lack of hedging, the strongest indicator of trust in Vincent Keating and Jan Ruzicka's view (2014). The development of a common identity or we-feeling could hence be seen as a potential step further towards solid trust, as it is the key feature of

[7]This argument, which borrows from Constructivism by focusing on social processes of encapsulation (rather than on the mere instrumental interest in doing so), does not reject the nexus that constructivists establish between identity and interest. The reason why the potential trustee's interests may broaden, even if trustor and trustee do not develop a common identity or we-feeling, is that some individual social identities support broader interests than a selfish national interest. As a multilateralist, that is, as a promoter and member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the PRC includes the respect of international law in its interest more than it does with the the pursuit of competitive relations as a major power operating in a competitive international system (AIIB 2022).

a 'security community' (Deutsch *et al.* 1957) where the perceived risk is brought to zero and the security dilemma no longer plays a role.

In contemporary international organisations, the encapsulation process just described leads their members to consider themselves as an indivisible group dealing with an indivisible problem. Perceived indivisibility, through a shared sense of solidarity, is crucial as it provides the basis for diffuse reciprocity, both defining features of 'qualitative' multilateralism, as distinct from its purely nominal/quantitative version (Ruggie 1992). Trust is thus a "vital precondition for effective international cooperation" (United Nations 2024). This understanding explains why, today, declining trust is seen as a threat to the functioning of international organisations.

How declining trust may impact the workings – and consequently the output legitimacy – of international organisations is easy to grasp. Perceived indivisibility explains, for example, why the international community adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development even though not all UN members might have considered the 17 goals as part of their respective national interests. They recognised that the interest of their fellow UN members in overcoming problems that badly affect their citizens is legitimate and valuable, and worthy of the solidarity that ultimately led to the collective mutual encapsulation of such interests. It is hard to see how the goals can eventually be reached if the solidarity reflecting mutual encapsulation fails. Not surprisingly, the grave concerns expressed by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2022) at the 77th General Assembly are based on the assessment that "divides are growing deeper" and "trust is crumbling", generating a "colossal global dysfunction" that hinders delivery.

Yet, up until the 2000s, the level of trust enjoyed by the international community was sufficient to support multilateral cooperation, protecting its workings from selfish and opportunistic decisions taken by participants. Why this is no longer the case is the issue discussed in the next section.

US-PRC relations and the shift towards pervasive mistrust

Acknowledging a general decline in inter-state trust, many observers are concerned that pervasive mistrust may soon permeate world politics, feeding widespread higher perceived uncertainty and exposure to risks. The developments behind this unfortunate and threatening prospect deserve thorough analysis.

Today, the most widely discussed instance of a systemic degradation of trust is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is not simply because the intuitive source of inter-state trust is compliance with formal obligations and the Russian Federation is one of the original signatories of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum providing security guarantees to Ukraine.[8] In fact, Moscow's move could be viewed as the living proof that some subjects – leaders as well as ordinary individuals – do not care about their own and their countries' reputation (besides not caring about the rules) and are prepared to pay the price of being untrustworthy. As long as this disruptive attitude characterises outliers, its impact on the socio-institutional fabric – be it domestic or international – is serious, but is usually dealt with

[8]On the basis of this agreement – whose other signatories were the US and UK – Ukraine gave up the former Soviet nuclear arsenal located in its territory. Both the Russian Federation (via the USSR) and Ukraine are founding members of the UN.

collectively so as not to cause irreparable damage. What makes the Ukraine war a bellwether of the ongoing generalised trust crisis in international politics is the fact that a large number of countries – among them heavyweights such as the PRC, India and South Africa – chose not to condemn the blatant violation of the most fundamental provisions of the UN Charter that occurred when Russia launched its attack on 24 February 2022.[9]

Besides exposing the modest role that many countries are choosing to assign to international law and multilateralism,[10] the Ukraine war has activated an escalatory dynamic in the breakdown of international trust. Reversing the trend of the post-colonial age, it has reminded states that their survival is no longer a given in the 21st century: the weaponisation of historiography means that the ontological security of states can be compromised to the point that the very legitimacy of their existence may be openly called into question to justify actions aimed at limiting – if not extinguishing – their sovereignty.[11] It would be a mistake, however, to confuse the magnifying effect of this particular conflict on pervasive mistrust with the root causes of the critical shrinking of trust that many observers had been warning about well before the war (Lieberthal and Wang 2012; Rudd 2021; Yan 2021; Wang 2021; Schneider 2022), and which made the war possible in the first place. For such root causes we must turn to US-PRC relations.

As is widely known, only weeks prior to the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the PRC released a Joint Statement containing the unusually ambitious wording whereby "friendship between the two states has no limits […] there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation" (Presidency of Russia 2022). While the same document added that the "strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries", observers have generally concluded that such bold articulation of political solidarity between Moscow and Beijing, at a time when Russian military build-up at Ukraine's borders was already well under way, enhanced Vladimir Putin's confidence at a critical juncture in the decision-making process within the Kremlin. Moreover, since the start of kinetic war, the PRC's decision to prioritise its political solidarity with Russia over its own recognition of the Budapest Memorandum protecting Ukraine's territorial integrity[12] has become an increasingly important enabling factor for Moscow's military campaign, to the extent that scholars have begun to discuss the Ukraine war as evidence of the emergence of a 'Global East' jointly led by the PRC and Russia, which seeks to "dethrone Western liberal values" and bring about an international order that is more hospitable to regional blocs, spheres of influence and autocracy (Ikenberry 2024, 127; Zheng 2024).[13]

[9]These countries – 35 overall – did not vote the General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1 deploring the aggression and asking for the immediate end to Russian military operations. Five countries voted against the resolution, 12 did not take part in the vote, while 141 voted for the resolution.

[10]On the value of international law and, consequently, of consistent conduct by all members of the international community with respect to the future of a rules-based order, see Christoph Heusgen (2022).

[11]Putin alluded to the notion that Ukraine is not a country in its own right in his address to the Duma on 18 March 2024.

[12]As clarified by the PRC's most senior diplomat and Politburo member, Wang Yi, Beijing is not a signatory to the Budapest Memorandum, but has recognised it through a government statement.

[13]Unsurprisingly, Russia endorses this notion and pitches both Global East and Global South against a "collective West" intent on "systematically contain[ing] Russia" (Lavrov 2024).

Chinese scholars and officials are of course well aware that Beijing's policy choices over Ukraine come at a high cost for the PRC's traditional foreign policy preferences. Among other consequences, Moscow's actions have given the US an opportunity to restore its credibility after the 2021 Afghan debacle, invigorated a previously "brain-dead NATO" (*The Economist* 2019) and, most importantly, provided impetus for the kind of deeper transatlantic synergy[14] that runs fundamentally against the PRC's strategic objective to see Europe pursue an independent foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Washington's preferences. We argue that Beijing's seemingly self-defeating posture on the Ukraine issue is determined by a long-running breakdown in trust between the PRC and the US, which has metastasised into the mistrust we see taking hold globally today – a process no doubt accelerated, but not caused by, the Ukraine war.

Why has trust in US-PRC relations collapsed? An offensive realist would probably oversimplify the answer: "Pick any two states, make them the most powerful states in the world, and they will mistrust each other enough to fight a cold war, if not a hot one" (Kydd 2005, 15). In fact, one does not need to be a realist of any stripe to acknowledge that, today, the heightened US-PRC competition can be expected to fuel mistrust between the two powers to the point that it may spiral out of control. After all, as we may have seen from direct experience, mistrust "is itself corrosive, producing attitudes and actions that themselves contribute to greater distrust". Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi (2012, vi) warned their respective leaderships against entering this sort of dynamics a decade ago, but in vain.

That trust is not an ancillary, but rather a fundamental problem within US-PRC relations has long been recognised by scholars. Gan Junxian and Mao Yan (2007, 61) explicitly referred to distrust as a "root cause" of difficulties in the relationship as early as 2007, despite the two decades from 1996 to 2008 being generally regarded as those in which trust between the two countries was most actively enhanced (Jiang and Wang 2019, 23).

The US and the PRC have a notoriously long history of mistrust, dating back to the very genesis of China in its current political-institutional configuration. For some 20 years since its establishment in 1949, the PRC and the US were enemies in the existential confrontation of the Cold War. While the collapse of global Communism in 1989-91 transformed Washington's strategic predicament, re-orienting national efforts towards the advancement of a US-led liberal international order of global outreach, Chinese leaders have never experienced a similar liberation from the imperative of regime survival. In this fundamental sense, for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) the Cold War never really ended, even though the economic reforms launched by paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s and reaffirmed after the repression of the 1989 Tiananmen protests, effectively indicated that Beijing no longer believed in Marxism-Leninism as a universal political project, contributing to the optimistic expectation of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992). For the PRC's ruling élite, the endurance of the CCP's monopoly of power in the PRC remains the first of its 'core interests' (*hexin liyi*). When Chinese President Xi Jinping (PRC 2023) states that in today's world "Cold War thinking

[14]It is worth noting that the possibility of a second Trump presidency is the main driver of the recent discourse on Europe's strategic autonomy, showing how even deep synergies are subject to the high volatility of present international relations.

is making a comeback [and] ideological confrontation is reiterated", his words are best understood as a more pressing reiteration of warnings that have in fact been issued by all his predecessors since Mao: that America remains intent on controlling the PRC either by changing its political system from within through 'peaceful evolution' (Zhai 2009) or destabilisation, or by undermining its material or ontological security.

Based on these historical premises, one may wonder how any amount of trust could in fact be established between the two countries in the first place, given that it is precisely the degrading of such bilateral trust that has spawned today's pervasive mistrust in the international domain. Our argument is that for some three decades, from the late 1970s to the late 2000s, both countries have engaged in a form of *strategic* parallel interest encapsulation. For Washington, this meant incorporating the PRC's development needs into the US's foreign and economic policies, culminating in the costly decision to support the PRC's accession to the WTO in 2001, which all but sealed the indispensable role of the Chinese economy in co-shaping the process of globalisation. President Barack Obama summarised this approach in 2013, reiterating that "it is in the United States' interest that China continues on the path of success, because we believe that a peaceful and stable and prosperous China is not only good for Chinese but also good for the world and for the United States" (Obama 2013). For Beijing, encapsulating the US's interests entailed legitimising the expansion of the Western liberal order of the Cold War era into a US-led global project. The PRC achieved this by integrating itself within international organisations and regimes that constitute the institutional infrastructure of that order (Johnston 2019) and gradually becoming a prominent stakeholder in this realm (Zoellick 2005).

The strategic nature of both interest encapsulation dynamics is revealed by the fact that each could credibly be constructed – and has effectively been portrayed, when expedient for domestic political reasons – as constituting not an end in itself, but rather a means toward a longer-term objective. In this context, the trust generated by interest encapsulation is far more fragile, as it simultaneously generates trust and catalyses a deeply-held suspicion. In the absence of sustained manifest trustworthiness by both sides, a spiral of recrimination may quickly escalate.

The origin of such misgivings is well-known. In the case of US engagement towards the PRC, historical precedents and the generally accepted logic of international power transition have induced Chinese observers and policy-makers to suspect that Washington's openness to Chinese development would ultimately be contingent on regime change in Beijing and on the PRC's acceptance of an undeclared, but nonetheless effective, 'Wolfowitz doctrine'.[15] In official Chinese political lexicon, the assumed temporariness of the PRC's interest encapsulation by the US – and therefore of trust between the two countries – is well captured by the frequent reference to a 'window of opportunity' for the PRC's development, that can only remain open until Washington loses confidence in its strategic trust investment. According to this view, fundamental differences inherent in the two countries' political and value systems make the US

[15]The Wolfowitz Doctrine refers to a controversial set of guidelines for US foreign policy developed in 1992 to provide a strategic framework following the end of the Cold War. One particular section often quoted by Chinese scholars to decry US 'hegemonism' states that Washington should "preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests […] These regions include Europe, East Asia, the Middle East/Persian Gulf, and Latin America" (National Security Council 1992, 2).

wary of the competitiveness of the PRC's identity (Zhu 2003, 20). Thus, only when the PRC engages in the type of reforms that make it 'more like America' does the US consider it trustworthy (Gan and Mao 2007). Conversely, the more it pursues its own peculiar 'political technology' (*zhengzhi jishu*) of party-state organisation (Wang 1986) to fully modernise the country and enhance the PRC's place in the international hierarchy, the less willing the US will be to keep encapsulating Beijing's development interests.

A specular view is held in Washington by those who have long suspected ulterior motives in the PRC's trust-building efforts toward the US. These observers argue that Beijing's encapsulation of US interests into its foreign policy is tactical at best. According to this view, what the Chinese authorities are after is in fact 'trust power', that is to say a way to mobilise trustworthiness as an active vehicle of influence that would "help alleviate the […] strategic pressure faced by China in a unipolar system during its peaceful development" (Chen 2020, 105). Recognising as a central goal of its grand strategy the shaping and maintaining of a favourable international environment to concentrate on national development (economic, social and political), Beijing's socialisation into norms of practice within the international liberal order between the 1980s and the 2000s in fact belied subtle and pragmatic challenges to the norms of principle upon which the order was based (Jones 2020).

The high level of uncertainty about long-term intentions that marked US-PRC relations even as they worked to lay the foundations of a trusting relationship through parallel encapsulation of the respective interests helps explain the speed at which this constructive process has been unravelling since the late 2000s, ushering in a phase of "rapid loss of mutual trust" (2008-17) followed by one of "severe trust destruction" (Jiang and Wang 2019, 23). It cannot, however, by itself explain the genesis of such shift from trust-building towards spiralling mistrust. What 'weaponised' uncertainty is the perception of a fast "narrowing gap in power" (Lieberthal and Wang 2012, xi). As this scenario became more immediately evident following the 2007 US sub-prime financial crisis, fuelling the aforementioned long-standing parallel suspicions, both the PRC and the US began to more urgently hedge against the potential long-term disruptive consequences of their reciprocal interest encapsulation. In doing so, their investment in manifest trustworthiness diminished, relative to more pronounced perceived hedging, triggering the spiral of recrimination that has since led to the undermining of trust between the two countries. The intrinsic logic of (the social construction of) power politics (Wendt 1992) has done the rest, ushering in a trend where competitive multipolarisation and more pronounced systemic heterogeneity breed pervasive mistrust in the international domain.

After 2008 in particular, the US perceived the PRC as challenging its established leadership role within the international system (Cao 2015, 83) and pursuing a form of assertive authoritarianism domestically and abroad (Economy 2018). Beijing's abandonment of the traditional 'low profile' foreign policy posture in favour of a 'becoming strong' approach was understood to entail a paradigm shift whereby "China believes that its rise to great-power status entitles it to a new role in world affairs - one that cannot be reconciled with unquestioned U.S. dominance" (Yan 2021, 40). For its part, the PRC has since perceived the US as committed to containing its rise. The Pivot to Asia (2010-11) of the Obama administration is often quoted as the first articulation of a systematic shift away from trust-building on Washington's part, but many Chinese

observers have since remarked that it was the 9/11 terrorist attack that delayed the US strategic re-orientation: "[President George W.] Bush's remarks during the presidential campaign and his policies in the early days of his administration had many similarities with [President] Trump's" (Fan 2019). The 2017 US National Security Strategy stated that trust between the US and the PRC had broken down, describing the PRC as a challenge to American Power. Under the Biden administration the wording has changed, but not the basic assessment that Beijing "harbours the intention and increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order" (White House 2017; 2022).

Unsurprisingly, the image of the 'Thucydides trap' (Allison 2015) – that is, the security dilemma as it plays out between the established dominant power and its main challenger – became the frame through which the decision-makers initially started looking at the relation. Chinese President Xi himself mentioned this mechanism during a visit to the US in 2015. He openly took this opportunity to deny that it should be understood as a trap and that while it is a very difficult predicament to escape, miscalculations are likely to transform a misguided expectation into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Xi 2015).

In theory, one could expect a modicum of common ground to act as mitigating factor: after all, even when two states want a good that cannot be shared or divided up, they may have a common interest in controlling the cost of their rivalry. Mistrust, however, "can turn such a shared interest into a zero-sum game where one party's gains are the other's losses" (Larson 1997, 705). The grim state of US-PRC relations may be extremely difficult to ameliorate exactly for this reason: in a game now perceived as purely zero-sum it is no longer possible to encapsulate the interest of the other. Even in areas where only collective action can be meaningful, such as climate change, the possibility that the other player may gain by appearing as exerting climate leadership is enough to lower the chances of cooperation.

The repertoire of mistrust-related indirect systemic repercussions of US-PRC competition is large. Two instances are especially worth mentioning for their impact on ulterior trusting relations. The first is the weaponisation of an increasing number of domains beyond traditional security. The second is the growing push towards hedging that many actors perceive, as they are increasingly worried about heightening competitive dynamics that they do not control. Many countries – especially, but not only in Asia – today seem to believe that hedging is the only way to reduce their actual or prospective vulnerability and protect their autonomy in an international system seen as more and more tense. Let us look at these effects.

So many issues have recently been weaponised that any list, however long, will appear incomplete. Trade, finance and technology, prospectively digital currencies (*The Economist* 2022)[16] have been used as weapons in discourse and at times also in practice. So have migration, the Internet (Leonard 2021) and, more recently, energy sources. However, it is the weaponisation of phenomena that were thought to reflect and support constructive inter-state relations, including globalisation and interdependence (Farrell and Newman 2019), that explains why mistrust has become pervasive in the international domain. Mark Leonard (2021, 45) captures the importance of this new condition by connecting the current "deadly quality" of the US-PRC relation with a "connectivity-security dilemma" which "today applies as much to technology as it does to

[16]The subtitle of the article is telling: "In Beijing, the officials are preparing for conflict".

weapons". Mistrust, besides being taken as a structural feature of the international domain, seems to be literally gaining ground, expanding its influence in an increasing number of areas, fatally trapping more and more actors in a frightening spiral of zero-sum relations.

The heightening US-PRC competition may eventually lead to sheer disorder, besides pervasive mistrust, but for the time being it is turning into a vigorous contest to define the fundamentals of international life, that is, a competition over order-making. This development increases the opportunities for actors that may opt to engage selectively (Ollapally 2018; Mishra 2023) with the present rules-based order, while approaching alternative organisational forms and instances (such as the BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, but also the various 'platforms' that the PRC has established, which provide an alternative to the rules-based order also in terms of understanding multilateralism [Jacóbowski 2018]). Indirectly, the US-PRC struggle thus offers the possibility, but also a stronger rationale, for hedging. The extent to which this may become the norm is captured by Richard Higgott and Simon Reich's (2022) conceptualisation of an era of 'fuzzy bifurcation'. In a fuzzy world, hedging, that is, "the cultivation of a middle position to avoid choosing between other actors", is preferred with respect to bandwagoning and counterbalancing, as the recent cases of Turkey and Hungary show (6). Yan Xuetong (2021, 46-7) agrees, arguing that

> for the most part […] China and the United States will build rival teams, with other countries deciding which to join on a case-by-case basis, depending on which arrangement best serves their national interests. Most governments will welcome this trend, having already adopted hedging strategies to avoid picking sides between the two powers. Of course, a club-based international system will bring complications of its own: a country that joins some coalitions led by Washington and others led by Beijing will be a less trustworthy partner for both powers.

Since mistrust can be expected to grow where situations encourage opportunism (Larson 1997, 711), the state of the system in which actors now decide how to engage others is deeply concerning. In the context of hedging, (mutual) encapsulation of interests is in fact at best partial and momentary, retaining an interest-based character that is not compatible with the reduction of uncertainty and volatility that – it has been argued – is necessary for trusting relations to develop.

As Higgott and Reich (2021) argued, hedging can also be interpreted as an inclination to adopt different and even alternative strategies, rather than multiple loyalties. In particular, they underline an inclination to practice this sort of hedging by the EU, "simultaneously act[ing] as a genuine good liberal internationalist and multilateral citizen at one end of the spectrum and a realist geopolitical strategic actor at the other" (5). This is intuitively a very challenging balancing act that increases the overall uncertainty within the international system. Regardless of how you look at hedging, if it becomes the norm, it will feed mistrust significantly by increasing the complexity and volatility of relations, two features that make encapsulation of others' interests a much more laborious social process.

The US-PRC bilateral relation, now characterised by the "near-complete erosion of trust" (Rudd 2021, 69), has many negative systemic repercussions that seem to hamper any prospect of a reversal of the trend leading towards pervasive mistrust. How to

address this situation in order to recover some space for trust-building in international affairs is the focus of the conclusion.

Concluding remarks: inverting the mistrust trend

In order to stop pervasive mistrust from becoming entrenched as a dangerous 'new normal' in international politics, a trust-building strategy for hard times has to be devised and pursued by concerned actors. In this respect, expert opinions are no less polarised than the discourse of great powers. Some scholars believe that little can be done to reverse the current trust-depleting trend. At best, competition between the US and PRC can be kept from developing into open conflict (Rudd 2021), protecting the international community from a hot war. Others see various urgent issues as part of a possible US-PRC common agenda, conveniently providing a rationale for collaborating towards shared ends, particularly in the realm of non-traditional security (Wang 2012). Of course, such sharable ends do exist: anthropocene is replete with threats that require collective action to protect the Earth's viability for human life. Restoring the credibility of the UN could well be a second aim shared by all sensible members of the international community, given the harm inflicted on the organisation by the war waged against Ukraine and, more recently, by the apparently unstoppable humanitarian crisis in Gaza (Hathaway 2024). The problem, as we know, is that, owing to the US-PRC rivalry and its spillover effects, world politics today does not allow us to put these recognisably general interests at the centre of specific processes of encapsulation, in particular within the all-important US-PRC bilateral relation.

To overcome this problem and prove the pessimists wrong, the key is to acknowledge that the game of world politics is now perceived by players as zero-sum and make it the point of departure of any trust-building strategy. It is the most significant direct consequence of the US-PRC rivalry on generally growing mistrust, so it has to be addressed first. While general calls to abandon this attitude proved worthless in the past, incrementally reversing this approach may turn out to be feasible. Avoiding the weaponisation of issues that belong to domains not immediately related to security should be a realistic first step. This move will help reframe the general understanding of the US-PRC competition as non-inherently existential (Chen Weiss 2022). Taking such a step is crucial in order to open up some space for the mutual encapsulation of respective specific interests, a space now all but extinguished by zero-sum discourses. Even if the process works, the picture will remain patchy, but better than being trapped by pervasive deepening mistrust. Moreover, encapsulation as a social process requires engagement, hence it could spill over into other domains. Looking beyond the bilateral relation, this step would also lower the pressure to hedge perceived by a variety of actors worried that intense US-PRC competition may harm them significantly sooner or later.

The second issue is consistency of discourse and conduct over time. This is essential for the would-be trustor to open up to a trusting relation. If the interest of the trustee has genuinely broadened to include the interest of the trustor, consistency should not be a problem: any reasonably rational actor pursues its interest, however defined, to the best of its ability. The real problem lies with the 'if'. Building trust, no doubt, is a demanding and costly endeavour in many respects. However, as Aaron Hoffman (2006, 19) reminds us, while "misplaced trust can lead to exploitation, misplaced distrust can

lead to needless and costly conflict". What living in a world of pervasive mistrust may mean – from failing cooperation to outright war – suggests that any alternative to investing in trust is a no-win for all present and future generations.

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