



## The Test of Trust

**Patricia Espinosa**

Much of the work devoted to understanding and addressing national security challenges stems from a judicious sense of suspicion, if not outright mistrust. Identifying risks and threats—whether human or natural in origin—and taking measures to avert them is essential to maintaining a stable, secure environment.

National security, however, also depends on mutually beneficial and consistent relationships with other actors—allies, partners, even sympathizers—that are ultimately based on trust. As with so many aspects of international relations, these two opposing attitudes—trust and mistrust—reflect, at the level of national states, pervasive features of social interaction, whether one is talking about human or investment bonds, personal or national security.

As history shows, building trust is more beneficial than managing mistrust. The advantages of collaboration tend to outweigh the benefits of confrontation, provided those involved share some common goals, have a basic sense of respect for each other, and face no irreconcilable differences. This proviso is essential for the statement to hold true and that is why trust has acquired such relevance in today's globalized world. Today, for many global issues, collaboration is the only option that stands any chance of success.

This is especially true in the case of climate change. The global climate agenda is not a single, self-contained issue that can be treated in isolation, but an all-encompassing challenge that affects many aspects of people's lives and calls for sweeping changes in people's lifestyles. Addressing this challenge demands resolute commitments and contributions from every country, every community, and ultimately, every individual.

The critical importance of trust in global efforts against climate change came to the fore at the end of COP15, in Copenhagen. The outcome of that session showed that, even if motivated by the best of intentions, actions that fail to give due consideration to the viewpoints of all countries—regardless of the relative contribution they can or are expected to make to a common endeavor—end up undermining the very goals they seek to achieve. The international regime is predicated on the notion that, as a member of the international community, each nation-state has the same rights and prerogatives as any other. Disregarding this fundamental principle engenders a sense of

unfairness and is perceived—rightly or wrongly—as an unequal, heavy-handed treatment.

Instead of feeling confident that a comprehensive and open consultation process was underway, many delegates attending the climate conference in Copenhagen, especially those from developing countries, felt that they were being asked simply to validate a series of resolutions that had been crafted with no regard to their opinions, let alone their contributions. As a result, valuable, sensible proposals prepared in good faith, though perhaps not properly presented and promoted, were brushed aside, and negotiations came to a standstill. It took painstaking, dedicated work over the following twelve months to regain the confidence of parties, observers, and stakeholders. This was ultimately achieved by ensuring that every voice was heard, by holding consultations in an open and inclusive fashion, and by showing consistency between avowed intentions and actual conduct.

The lesson from Copenhagen is not forgotten at the UNFCCC. The commitment to inclusiveness, openness, and transparency must be substantiated in every session and every exchange. This is also central to ongoing efforts toward the success of COP26. There are many complex issues currently under negotiation. Much must be done to reconcile different positions and build common understanding. But the possibility of success in all areas crucially depends on mutual trust, which, in turn, is contingent on the fulfillment of previous pledges. There is no point in undertaking new commitments if those assumed in the past are seen to be disregarded.

Diplomacy has always been based on trust. It is, at the same time, the most readily available means of building the confidence necessary for collaboration among international actors with different, often divergent interests. From the perspective of the intergovernmental process on climate change, the connection between both concepts may be summarized in this way: trust is both a means and an outcome of diplomacy. In international affairs, there can be no successful diplomacy without trust, just as there can be no trust without effective diplomacy.

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