New Ways to Reduce Distrust Between the U.S. & Russia

By knowing how to change the attitudes of individual people, we may be able to change the attitudes of national elites.

Milton J. Rosenberg

"Nations are not people, and therefore the troubles between them cannot be understood through psychology." So runs a complaint that psychologists often hear from political scientists these days.

This point of view strikes me as both justified and unjustified, depending upon the kind of psychological approach being considered. Worthy of condescension is the sort of shallow psychologizing that suggests that national frustration leads directly to national aggression, or that attempts to explain particular wars as due to the madness of some specific historical figure or the basic personality structure of a whole people.

Another approach to the psychology of international relations, however, has been quietly maturing over the last decade. This approach assumes that the interests of various nations are frequently in real conflict—but that it is also common for international rivalries of the war-risking kind to be based largely upon attitudes that have no clear factual support. A guiding purpose in this new approach is to achieve a better understanding of the psychological forces that tend to drive both types of conflict toward limited, and then unlimited, war.

One important development is the attempt to focus some of the major theories of attitude change upon the relations between national elites. This may point ways out of dangerous international antagonisms that are rooted mainly in attitudes. And even where the clash of national interests is apparently "intractable," the alteration of background attitudes may still point ways out of the dilemma.

In this article, I hope to show how two of the major theories of attitude change might be applied in lowering some of the barriers to realistic settlement of international issues.

For simplicity I shall deal mainly with the interaction between the American and Soviet policy élites. But what is suggested here could be readily applied to aspects of the U.S.-Chinese or the Soviet-Chinese relationships—or, for that matter, to those of Israel and Egypt or any other set of national élites locked into mutual disdain and suspicion but not yet caught in long-term regression to active war, as we now are in Vietnam.

The Power of Positive Reinforcement

The instrumental-learning model of attitude dynamics was developed by Carl I. Hovland and Irving L. Janis and their associates, first in field experiments conducted for the Army during World War II and then...
at Yale. At its core is the idea that we learn to like or dislike (or to trust or distrust) someone or something by reinforcement—that is, because in the past the expression of our like or dislike has brought us rewards or reduced our needs.

The largest amount of experimental study has been devoted to two types of rewards. One is tied directly to what a person can gain if he changes some specific attitude—for instance, a person could reduce his anxiety over his health if he adopted an uncompromisingly negative attitude toward smoking. The second type of reward is due to increased social acceptance gained by moving one’s attitudes toward the attitudinal standards set by others. Usually this happens not through mere cynical compliance, but through a gradual and “internalized” reorientation.

Changing the attitude of another person, according to this model, requires a series of steps:
—attract the attention of the person or groups whose attitudes you want to change;
—establish your credibility and trustworthiness;
—provide well-planned and informative communications that cast doubt upon the reasons and rewards that bolster the present attitude, and make change seem desirable by highlighting the rewards associated with the new, advocated attitude; and
—get the person or group to “rehearse” the new attitude for a while—to make its promised rewards seem more real and immediate.

Experimental work conducted by the Yale group and others has identified a number of factors that determine the success with which the various stages are negotiated. Among them are the basic credibility of the source of the persuasive communication; the way in which the communication is structured; the use of anxiety arousal; “role-playing” as a way of getting the person to consider the arguments and incentives that support the new attitude; the importance to the person of groups that support his attitude or its opposite; and personality factors making for general persuadability or rigidity.

Clearly, this model is relevant to changing the attitude pattern of distrust that continues to hamper movement toward true American-Soviet conciliation. The policy elites involved are composed of men playing roles that reduce flexibility. What limits these men most is that they feel required to distrust the opposing power and the assurances offered by its elite. Yet each side recognizes that the other’s attitude of distrust must be converted toward trust if anything better than an easily-upset détente is to be achieved. Specifically, each side faces the problem of getting the other to believe its assurances that it will refrain from a surprise nuclear attack; that it will abide by arms-control and disarmament agreements (even when these cannot be effectively policed); that it will scrupulously adhere to sphere-of-influence agreements; and that it will accept necessary limitations of sovereignty as new and powerful international institutions are developed.

How are such attitudes of trust to be cultivated while policy elites still pursue and protect national interests? How can the Soviet-American “credibility gap” be closed?

The Yale experiments on credibility indicated that what seems to count most are the communicator’s apparent status and expertise. But these have little bearing upon relations between policy-elite representatives, who are usually perceived by their opposite numbers as possessing both of these qualities in more than sufficient degree.

Closing the Credibility Gap

At this level there is, however, a more direct route toward cultivating attitudes of trust. Though difficult to pursue, it must be taken, even while each nation strives to preserve and advance its own national interests. That route, to speak bluntly, is to stop posturing, faking, and lying.

Is it possible—even conceivable—that nations, in their relations with one another, can abandon the deceit that, since Machiavelli, has seemed essential to statecraft? Many specialists would immediately answer, in the tones of revealed doctrine, “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.” But at the risk of sounding naive, I believe that we need take a fresh look.

I suggest that the present international system is so inadequate and dangerous that the American and Soviet leaders have very compelling reasons to go beyond the limits of conventional Realpolitik and impose some moral order on their relationships. The exploration of this radical possibility could best begin with a direct assault upon the attitudinal problem of international distrust. There are probably many ways in which the behavioral sciences might help to mount such an assault. One would be the use of inter-nation gaming and simulation techniques—to provide “dry run” tests of an international system based upon a principle of generalized trust. Such studies might clarify just how feasible, how resistant to breakdown, a system of this sort would be, and how it might best be instituted.

But we need not wait. Immediate initiatives in honesty and self-revelation are now available for the seizing. Even though a great deal remains secret, even though the international system remains more closed than open, much could still be revealed to an antagonist under conditions that would allow him the opportunity for verification. There are possibilities in the direct revelation of data about arms technology, economic