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Trust, but Verify

By Diane Chido, Scholar-in-Residence
August 2025



There have been numerous times in modern history when leaders had to trust one another to achieve diplomatic or other aims. In the case of World War II, for instance, leaders of the United States and Great Britain had to take the plunge, trusting Soviet Premier Josef Stalin to be their ally against the aggressions of German Führer Adolf Hitler. This global conflict is often framed as a battle of ideologies—democracy, fascism, and communism vying for supremacy. But once the democratic nations allied with the communist vanguard state, despite their opposing views on private capital, the war became less about ideology. It turned into a desperate struggle for territorial integrity with ideological differences left to be sorted out later.



Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact division plan

For British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt to trust Stalin was a truly enormous leap of faith. In 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact ensuring nonaggression between the Soviet Union and Germany allowed both countries to conspire to invade and divide Poland down the middle at the Vistula River as shown in the map.^[i] Poland was a British ally, and the U.S. was not yet in the war. This invasion led Britain to declare war on Germany after its famous appeasement the year before under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain did nothing about Germany's annexation of the Czech Sudetenland.

Britain's mutual defense pact with Poland only stipulated action if one of them was attacked by Germany. It did not require the same for an attack by the Soviet Union. This was convenient in the end, as Hitler invaded the Soviet Union once he had secured half of Poland, and Stalin was forced to change sides. Historical accounts indicate the Stalin was personally pained by Hitler's betrayal. A 1971 memoir of Stalin's successor Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev states that at a military briefing just after Hitler entered Paris, Stalin exclaimed, "Lenin founded our state and we've f-d it up!"^[ii]

Stalin had mistrusted Hitler from the start, but he'd thought the Germans would be bogged down in France for months or years, giving the Soviet Union time to prepare for the eventual invasion. But France fell in a month, allowing Hitler to turn his attention east.

On Dec. 8, 1987, at the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, U.S. President Ronald Reagan repeated a Russian proverb that he favored: "Trust, but verify." This was a phrase that became closely associated with Reagan's Soviet

policies, and even Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev joked at that meeting, “You say that to me every time.”^[iii] In this case, it meant mutual monitoring of both countries’ nuclear stockpiles, the process for which was included in the treaty. Perhaps, Stalin should have taken it to heart in dealing with Hitler.

Much more recently, U.S. President Donald Trump seems to have trusted foreign leaders without the benefit of verifying their track records. Another saying, not Russian, goes, “Past behavior is an indicator of future behavior.” This is an adage of intelligent professionals developing profiles of allies and adversaries and their likely future actions or positions. I teach my students about the importance of culture using the model of analyzing Values, Beliefs, Behaviors, and Norms. These will tell you a lot about another culture, but the only verifiable element is behaviors, which can be directly observed. You can learn what someone professes to believe via written word, but only by observing behavior can you see what their actions and consequences. Those actions hold a predictive value for what that person might do again.

While traditional diplomacy is conducted through negotiations, it is codified in treaties, again, written promises. But treaties can be broken, and this is an observable element of behavior. In 2015, the U.S. signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran to limit its nuclear weapons development. This treaty was nullified in 2018 by the first Trump administration, which is now attempting to revive negotiations for a new agreement.

Trump famously repeated on the campaign trail that he would end the war in Ukraine in a day, maybe even before his inauguration,^[iv] so confident was he in his negotiating partner, Russian President Vladimir Putin. Two months after his election victory, Trump was visibly angry with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a televised Oval Office meeting on Feb. 28, 2025. Trump accused Zelenskyy of not doing enough to end the war in his country three years after Russia invaded it saying, “You’re gambling with the lives of millions of people. You’re gambling with World War III.”^[v]

A month later, on March 30, after a telephone call with Putin, Trump stated in an interview that he was “very angry” and “pissed off” when Putin criticized Zelenskyy’s leadership, adding that the comments were “not going in the right location.”^[vi] Further, on July 14, in an impromptu press conference, Trump said, “Putin really surprised a lot of people, he talks nice and then he bombs everybody in the evening, so there’s a little bit of a problem there. I don’t like it.”^[vii]

However, on June 20, Putin stated clearly at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum that that he considered Russians and Ukrainians to be one people and “in that sense, we see Ukraine as ours.” He further emphasized, “There is an old saying, not quite a proverb, but a long-standing principle: Where the foot of a Russian soldier steps is Russian land.” His statement and actions

have not wavered since he signaled his intention to invade Ukraine. His messaging and actions have been consistent ever since he gave a long speech about the incredibility of Ukraine's existence of a sovereign nation in February 2022, the night before the invasion.

More recently and regarding another international conflict, on June 23, 2025, Trump gleefully announced a ceasefire on X, writing, "CONGRATULATIONS TO EVERYONE! It has been fully agreed by and between Israel and Iran that there will be a Complete and Total CEASEFIRE" to begin in 12 hours. ^[viii] By the following day, at another impromptu news conference, Trump angrily stated, "Israel as soon as we made the deal, they came out and dropped a boat load of bombs the likes of which I've never seen before. The biggest load that we've seen, I'm not happy with Israel. OK, when I say now you have 12 hours, you don't go out in the first hour and just drop everything you have on them. So, I'm not happy with him [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu]. I'm not happy with Iran either."

On July 22, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said Trump was "caught off guard" by the recent Israeli strikes in Syria and on a Catholic church in Gaza on July 17. "In both accounts, the President quickly called the Prime Minister to rectify those situations," Leavitt said.^[ix] Netanyahu later publicly apologized for bombing the church and called Pope Leo XIV to apologize personally for the damage and the deaths of three people and another 10 who were injured.

Beyond the church bombing, a Vatican statement to ABC recognized the ongoing mass destruction, humanitarian crisis, and more than 50,000 deaths in Gaza by Israel's war, saying, "During the meeting, the Holy Father renewed his appeals for renewed impetus to negotiations and for a ceasefire and an end to the war. He reiterated his concern for the dramatic humanitarian situation of the population in Gaza, whose excruciating price is being paid especially by children, the elderly, and the sick."^[x]

The role of an intelligence operative is to collect information. In the case of World War II, the most ubiquitous method for this was eyewitness reports or human intelligence, referred to by the shorthand, HUMINT. There were telegraphs, telephones, photography, and radio transmission then, but the information relayed was typically the result of people seeing and reporting on armies' actions.

Today, we have much more technology to help gather information, including various forms of aerial surveillance, soil and chemical testing to determine the presence of nuclear or chemical weapon development, cyber tracking, GPS, and more. Intelligence analysts take this collected information, synthesize it, analyze it, and make estimates to determine what an ally or adversary is doing and is likely to do next. Once the analyst's supervisory elements report these findings and

forecasts to their leaders, it is then up to those leaders to determine how or whether to act upon them.

Trump's first visit after his inauguration in January 2017 was to the Central Intelligence Agency where he promised to support the intelligence community "1,000%."^[xi] The best way to support these agencies whose shared existential mission is to provide actionable information to the president and his chosen administrators as needed. This relationship is a two-way street. The agencies must strive to provide accurate and reasoned information and forecasts to decisionmakers, but the decisionmakers also have to accept the estimates as credible and make decisions based on them.

During World War II, Stalin distrusted the Nazis from the beginning and while initially allying with them, attempted to rein in their activities in Soviet ports and otherwise. But when the invasion came, he seemed to be surprised, disheartened, and completely unprepared. In Reagan's case, he had entire systems to verify that the Soviets, and later the Russians, would adhere to the nuclear agreement terms. Today, Trump has a long track record of Putin's duplicity and Netanyahu's ruthlessness on which to judge their actions, but it is up to Trump to use this information as president to ensure U.S. national interests are protected.

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- Your copy should address 3 key questions: Who am I writing for (audience)? Why should they care (benefit)? What do I want them to do (call-to-action)?

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Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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