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Center for **Empathy** in  
International Affairs

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# THE SOFTWARE OF GEOPOLITICS

## Empathy in International Affairs

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## Introduction

The Center for Empathy in International Affairs (CEIA), in collaboration with the Royal Institute of International Affairs – Chatham House, convened a consultation on empathy in international affairs in London on 29 June 2016. The consultation involved 20 experts listed below: academics, diplomats, analysts and authors from a range of institutions including: the House of Lords, Chatham House, Conciliation Resources, the European Council on Foreign Relations, the Ditchley Foundation, the Guardian newspaper, King’s College London, Oxford University, Oxford Research Group, and the Bar.

This briefing paper, written by CEIA Director Matt Waldman, records insights, analysis and ideas from the consultation. The paper also draws on Waldman’s own work and includes insights from other sources, especially CEIA consultations held in Brussels in collaboration with the European Institute of Peace, and in Washington, D.C., in collaboration with the United States Institute of Peace and the Alliance for Peacebuilding. As the CEIA-Chatham House event took place in London, much of the discussion focussed on the policies of the West, especially the U.K. and U.S., but many of the observations undoubtedly have wider application.

First, the paper considers the role of empathy in foreign policy-making, diplomacy, and conflict resolution. Having explored various uses of empathy in international affairs, the paper then considers its limitations and drawbacks. Given that these appear to be manageable, it considers whether in fact empathy has been institutionalised by states or international organisations. Finding that empathy has not been institutionalised, the paper then identifies and examines five major reasons for this. Finally, it sets out policy recommendations for the power and potential of empathy to be harnessed in international affairs.

The paper is structured as set out below and includes four case studies on Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, authored by experts Jonathan Steele, Ellie Geranmayeh, Chris Kolenda and Lawrence Freedman, respectively.

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## **Summary**

### **The concept of empathy**

Empathy, in international affairs, can be considered as the ability to imagine or grasp the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of others, drawing on knowledge of their character, culture, history and experience. Empathy's unique quality is that it requires a change of perspective, which in itself can yield greater understanding and mitigate biases. Empathy can be unidirectional or reciprocal, dynamic and interactive. It is often mistakenly equated with sympathy, compassion or approval. In recent years, empathy has been increasingly studied and explored by scholars, cultural thinkers and scientists.

### **Empathy in foreign policy-making and diplomacy**

Empathy informs foreign policy-making. It throws light on who the other party is, how they see things, what motivates them and what's important to them. Empathy helps policy-makers identify false assumptions about others that derive from inherent biases, and helps them anticipate how others are likely to behave and react. The Iraq intervention illustrates that this applies as much to a decision to intervene as it does to administering the intervention. If U.S. decision-makers had better understood the experience, mindset and perspectives of ordinary Iraqis they might have anticipated the rise to political dominance of Iraq's Shia parties and the potential for unrest.

Similarly, early in the Afghanistan intervention, the failure of U.S. forces to see the intervention through the eyes of Afghans meant that they were unaware of how they were undermining their own strategic goals. Civilian casualties, support for warlords and government corruption generated huge resentment among Afghans, which worked to the insurgents' advantage.

Empathy cannot be the sole or even principal basis for foreign policy-making. There are too many actors to empathize with and it does not tell decision-makers what to do. But, in revealing how others are likely to behave and respond in different scenarios, it provides information that is critical for the weighing of policy options.

Empathy is a core diplomatic skill that is mostly unacknowledged. It helps diplomats understand other countries, build relationships, exert influence and manage diplomatic crises. Empathy helps to build personal relationships that have a huge impact on inter-state relationships. It requires knowledge and skills, and often involves demonstrations of respect. In particular, familiarity with a foreign language can build understanding, improve communication and give diplomats additional leverage.

### **Empathy in conflict resolution**

Understanding the psychology of individuals, groups and their leaders is crucial for understanding conflict. Rational thinking and behaviour is disrupted by the trauma of conflict. Faced with existential threats, people tend to act on the basis of emotions and transcendent values. They lose their ability to empathize and are inclined to dehumanize or demonize adversaries.

Empathy helps to furnish mediators with critical information about the parties: their mindset, motivations, driving emotions and objectives, as well as their values and beliefs. Empathy can reveal misperceptions or false assumptions that drive hostilities, fears or concerns that block engagement, and opportunities for negotiation.

Empathy is closely connected to dialogue with adversaries. Of course, a party may decide to talk to adversaries without having empathized with them. But seeing another party's perspective and being aware of their rationale for confrontation – even if it is refuted – can increase a party's willingness to talk.

Moreover, it is almost impossible to interact with others without consciously or sub-consciously forming a conception of what's going on inside their heads. That is empathizing.

Engagement itself has several benefits: it can yield valuable information, create internal pressure, lend credibility to moderates, promote involvement in politics – and pave the way towards the negotiated resolution of conflict. In Northern Ireland, secret talks between the British Government and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (the IRA) initiated in the 1970s and pursued through the 1990s helped to build trust and laid the groundwork for an eventual settlement. By contrast, in Afghanistan the United States actively opposed dialogue with the Taliban. Had they empathized with the Taliban, they might have sooner come to an appreciation of the feasibility of negotiations. As it happened, talks were only initiated in late 2010, after the U.S. had already declared its intention to withdraw, which undercut Taliban incentives to negotiate and undermined the prospects for a settlement.

Empathy is a vehicle for allowing the other party to feel heard, respected and understood. This can help mitigate the other's hostility, lay the ground for talks and expand the influence of mediators. Empathy can also help shape how parties act at critical junctures. A less triumphant and more collaborative western approach towards Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which took into account the mindset and attitude of Russian officials, might have helped to avoid future hostility.

Many factors explain successful peace processes, such as the existence of a mutually hurting stalemate or geopolitical pressures, but trust-building is the bedrock of most processes. Trust involves belief in the reliability and predictability of others. In other words, it involves expectations of another's behaviour. It would be irrational and imprudent to form such expectations without first seeking to grasp what is happening inside the other's mind.

Hard political and economic interests brought Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk together in South Africa, but the process was sustained through personal relationships below the leadership level. The strong and empathic relationship between John Kerry and Javad Zarif underpinned constructive talks between the United States and Iran on the nuclear issue. Trust, built through successive talks, played a vital role in Cold War force reductions.

Empathy humanizes. As such, it can mitigate deep antagonisms and open up possibilities for reframing relationships. Taking a different perspective can catalyse innovative confidence-building measures. A simulation exercise in informal talks between Georgian-Abkhaz interlocutors during the 2000s helped to reframe the way key civic and political interlocutors on both sides saw the conflict and fed into UN efforts to facilitate a non-use of force agreement. Faltering talks between the Philippines government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) were transformed when Benigno Aquino became President of the Philippines and took into account his adversary's pressures and concerns.

### **Limitations and drawbacks**

Empathy has limitations and drawbacks. A party may empathize mistakenly or inaccurately. Empathy may be used for malign purposes and to target others' vulnerabilities. A party may empathize on a discriminatory basis, in favour of certain individuals or groups, and intense empathy for an in-group might even motivate violence. However, virtually all analytical tools and skills can be subject to malpractice or misuse and these considerations do not detract from empathy's utility. Rather, they suggest it should be used in a deliberate, self-critical and managed way. Some observers suggest empathizing can undercut moral judgment. But empathy is no substitute for the difficult task of ethical evaluation, and it is far better to judge on the basis of a deep understanding of others, which empathizing can help to provide.

A party that empathizes may come to appreciate an adversary's enmity or fear such that it discourages peace-making. Individuals may also face social and political costs for empathizing, for being seen to cut

across more belligerent narratives and attitudes. Yet, there is always a risk that deeper understanding, however achieved, has deleterious implications. That does not mean ignorance is preferable. Many kinds of behaviour, such as resisting oppression, involve risks and costs. That does not mean those risks and costs are not worth bearing. Whether or not those risks are worth bearing depends on many factors, including the potential benefits. In fact, the existence of costs for those who empathize only underscores the need for empathy to be institutionalised, which would help to mitigate those costs.

### **Institutionalisation of empathy**

Empathy depends on a certain level of knowledge but the way in which most foreign and defence institutions are organised inhibits the development of expertise. Personnel rules favour generalists, officials are frequently rotated between posts, and risk aversion limits their interaction with others.

Empathy is neither natural nor instinctive; it is a skill that needs training. Yet, few international professionals are trained to empathize. Empathy is rarely incorporated into standard procedures. Western intelligence agencies have prioritised operational objectives, such as targeting or force protection, at the expense of efforts to build a deep understanding of allies and adversaries. Thus, empathy as practised by states is ad hoc, piecemeal and reliant on individual instinct.

Empathic approaches can arise through mechanisms designed to test assumptions about others, explore alternative thinking and enable the expression of dissent. The experience of such mechanisms in the U.K. – challenge sessions, research analysts, special advisers and external panels – suggest that there are limits to their effectiveness. Moreover, they are not designed to incorporate an empathic approach into policy-making.

### **Obstacles to empathy**

There are five, interrelated reasons why empathy has been neglected in international affairs. First, by an intrinsic bias known as attribution error, decision-makers tend to over-estimate the hostility of adversaries, while downplaying the role of situational factors, especially their own action, in causing the adversary's behaviour. Other predispositions toward simplification, preserving self-esteem and self-image often cause a party to demonize an adversary and form a Manichean conception of the relationship: we are good, the enemy is bad. This paradigm is sometimes reinforced for political advantage as well as bolstered by propaganda, partisan media coverage and jingoistic sentiment. Demonizing enemies obviates the need to empathize with them. While some actors are in fact predatory or cruel, Manicheanism is usually an over-simplification. It thus impedes effective decision-making and can cause a party to overlook legitimate grievances as well as their own role in generating hostility. It contributes to the false and dangerous dichotomy: we either understand or oppose our adversaries.

Second, empathy requires a degree of open-mindedness, an appreciation of nuance and complexity, and a willingness to devote time and effort to understanding others' perspectives. As seen in the public debate prior to Brexit, today's polarized political environment tends to marginalise politicians with these qualities. Empathy also requires political courage, given the likely criticism, especially if it involves engaging enemies. Yet, too often contemporary political leaders prioritise popularity over prudent policy-making. Authoritarian societies, such as Russia, are perhaps even more prone to failures of empathy. As Lawrence Freedman writes with respect to Ukraine, Putin's policy goals were undermined by his misjudgement of the force and nature of the Euromaidan movement which opposed President Yanukovich and the lack of public support for a counter-revolution in the East, which he had sought to manufacture.

Third, empathy is commonly associated with sympathy, approval and disloyalty. There is even a suspicion of too much understanding. But empathy need not involve any sharing of feelings and it is over-simplistic to assume that in seeking to empathize with others we lose our long-standing values, beliefs or loyalties.

Even if such risks exist, they need to be weighed against the risks of decision-making in the *absence* of a deeper understanding derived from an empathic approach. Furthermore, only certain officials need to empathize at certain times.

Fourth, empathy is often conceived as a sentimental, non-rational impulse and is overlooked by theoretical and practical approaches to international relations that tend to focus on power and interests. But empathy can be used in a deliberate, detached and purposive way. Moreover, we know that emotions and perceptions shape and influence the behaviour of leaders and groups, especially during times of conflict. It would be *irrational* not to try to understand these forces. Decision-makers and analysts tend to be biased towards data that can be measured, defined and visualised but measurability is no proxy for utility. Information about how an adversary thinks, feels and perceives may be critical for determining strategy.

Finally, empathy tends to be associated with weakness and inaction. Partly due to U.S. strategic culture, military dominance and reliance on technology, the establishment gives little weight to empathy. But history's greatest strategists and generals have long recognised the need to understand the enemy. Empathy does not impede action. Moreover, acting without an appreciation of how others will react, for which empathy provides crucial insights, runs the risk of being costly, ineffective and even counter-productive. Recent U.S. foreign policy decisions, uninformed by a deep understanding of others, strongly suggest that even the powerful need to empathize. In fact, given the massive consequences of policy errors, it is especially the powerful who should equip themselves with empathy.

## **Recommendations**

Empathy has tremendous utility in informing foreign policy-making, strengthening diplomacy and sustaining and invigorating peace-making. Hard power often takes centre stage in world affairs but empathy is the essential software of geopolitics. It has been neglected for a range of unconvincing reasons and its absence has come at great cost. It will be required to tackle increasing international challenges, from instability in the Middle East to growing tensions with Russia. More broadly, the unequal impact of climate change and globalization, and the rise of populism, racism and nationalism, suggest that empathy is needed now more than ever. Five steps could make a difference:

1. Political leaders and international officials should acknowledge the importance and utility of empathy in international affairs. The United Nations Security Council should establish a taskforce to ensure that empathy is operationalized within UN agencies, peacekeeping operations and political missions.
2. States should restructure and adapt the way they operate, especially overseas, in order to build country and regional expertise and ensure information gathering is not unduly distorted by operational or political priorities. It should be standard practice to engage with adversaries.
3. All those with international responsibilities, from diplomats to practitioners, should undergo training to enhance their ability to empathize.
4. Empathizing should be incorporated into the standard operating and decision-making procedures of governments and NGOs. It should be a required stage of all major decision-making.
5. Specialised units should be formed within states and international organisations, and tasked with drawing on a wide range of sources to discern the mindset, emotions and perceptions of others.
6. Empathy should become a standard component of mediation training and in the mediation support units of international organisations.

## 1. The Concept of Empathy

This section considers the definition and central characteristics of empathy. In some disciplines empathy is defined in its affective sense, which entails a sharing of feelings. However, for the purposes of this paper, empathy is used in its cognitive sense. It can be considered as the ability to imagine or infer the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of others, drawing on knowledge of their character, culture, history and experience. It takes into account that a wide range of factors, including genuine grievances or false narratives, may have shaped another's mindset and outlook.

Empathy's unique attribute is that it requires a change of perspective. The way we see and process information depends on our viewpoint and is almost always distorted by intrinsic biases and sentiments. Therefore, this change in perspective can significantly change our interpretation of events and our understanding of others, even with the same information at hand.

Empathy is often mistakenly equated with sympathy and compassion, which involve or evoke pity or sorrow. But empathy is a way of thinking that may or may not elicit such feelings. Similarly, empathy does not equate to agreement or approval, just as the absence of empathy is not disagreement or disapproval. In fact, the antithesis of empathy is not necessarily demonization. The converse of empathy can be to assume the other person is thinking the same way as you are and has the same motives and mindset, whereas there may in fact be profound differences between the two of you that are not apparent.

Empathy can be unidirectional; it can also be reciprocal, interactive and dynamic. Practising empathy can cause us to reassess our assumptions about others and our interactions with them, leading to changes in our behaviour. The act of empathizing can also change others' perceptions and bring about changes in their behaviour. Separately, it is difficult to empathize and almost impossible to do so accurately, given the number, diversity, complexity and inaccessibility of others' thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

Over the past decade, an increasing number of writers and cultural thinkers, such as Jeremy Rifkin and Roman Krznaric, have argued in favour of empathy as a tool for addressing the social and environmental challenges posed by globalisation.<sup>1</sup> Social neuroscientists have studied the impact of empathy in diverse areas related to international affairs. Simon Baron-Cohen and Emile Bruneau, for instance, explore how a lack of empathy helps to explain human cruelty or inter-group violence.<sup>2</sup>

Given increasing research and thinking about empathy, the paper now turns to consider practical ways in which empathy plays a role in international affairs, drawing on the views of diplomats and practitioners themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The empathic civilization: the race to global consciousness in a world in crisis* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009). Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (London: Penguin/Random House, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). Mina Cikara, Emile Bruneau, Rebecca Saxe, 'Us and them: Intergroup failures of empathy', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20 (3), 149-153.

## 2. Empathy in Foreign Policy-making

This section considers the ways in which empathy can contribute to foreign policy-making, especially through informing decision-makers about other actors and helping them anticipate the consequences of their decisions. It considers the impact of the absence of empathy in U.S. policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the limits of empathy as a basis for policy.

A state cannot develop an effective foreign policy towards an interlocutor, ally or adversary without first acquiring an understanding of that party. While different analytical tools are required to throw light on different facets of another actor, empathy is crucial for understanding how the other party sees things, what motivates them and what's important to them. Crucially, empathy can enhance a party's appreciation of how it is seen by others. This kind of cognitive empathy does not imply that a state should therefore yield to that party's expectations or demands. Understanding is one thing; negotiating or agreeing reciprocal concessions is another.

Policy-making errors are likely if decisions are not based on a deep knowledge of the other party. Errors are also likely if policymakers do not take into account that their own interpretation of the facts may be distorted by inherent biases, or if they fail to recognise that the other party has real interests, concerns and emotions. There may be partial exceptions for superpowers at international, regional or local levels, which have a greater ability to impose their will on others, but the experience of U.S.-led overseas interventions since 2001 suggests that even superpowers need to empathize.

Above all, empathy helps policy-makers anticipate the consequences of their decisions. If they determine policy on the basis of a deep and holistic understanding of others, they are far better placed to judge how those actors or groups are likely to react to various policy measures, events and circumstances. This applies as much to a decision to go to war as to decisions on how to manage an intervention once it has been undertaken.

As Iraq analyst Jonathan Steele describes in the case study below, the failure of U.S. policy-makers to empathize with and understand ordinary Iraqis, especially in light of their culture, history and recent experience, led the United States to misjudge the likely impact of intervention. If U.S. officials had empathized with Iraqis they might have anticipated the rise to political dominance of Iraq's Shia parties and religious leaders, the distrust of most Iraqis towards foreign occupiers, and the upsurge of armed resistance not just from Sunnis ousted from power but from Shia Iraqis, too.

U.S. forces' subsequent lack of empathy, after the intervention had been launched, only made matters worse. For instance, the confrontational U.S. policy toward the Shia cleric and political leader Moqtada al Sadr, in spite of his evident popularity among marginalised Iraqis in Baghdad, led to the emergence of the Mahdi Army and ensuing military clashes.

Similarly, a lack of empathy with ordinary Afghans hampered U.S. and allied efforts in Afghanistan, as former U.S. commander and defence official Chris Kolenda describes in the case study below. U.S. forces in Afghanistan largely failed to see the intervention through the eyes of ordinary Afghans and were therefore unaware of the extent to which they were undermining their own strategic goals. In short, the combination of civilian casualties caused by U.S. operations, predation by U.S.-backed warlords and corruption in the U.S.-funded government generated increasing resentment toward foreign forces, undermined the Afghan government's legitimacy and drove a small but significant number of Afghans into the insurgency. Lack of empathy in Afghanistan also contributed to misjudgements of both allies and enemies. U.S. forces were often unaware of how purported local partners manipulated the U.S. into

attacking rival groups. At a higher level, U.S. policy-makers mistakenly conflated the Taliban and al Qaida, overlooking opportunities for negotiations.

Empathy can never constitute the sole, or even principal, basis for foreign policy-making. Some geopolitical challenges involve so many actors that it would be too difficult or onerous for any single actor to empathize fully with all the other actors. It would be unrealistic to expect the multiplicity of interests, concerns and characteristics to be taken into account. Moreover, even if a party is able to empathize with and understand an enemy, it may continue to pose a threat. Understanding does not tell policy-makers what to do.

Thus, empathy should be treated as one consideration among others, albeit an important one, in developing effective foreign policy. For example, we may empathize with President Putin and accept that he believes the expansion of NATO poses a threat to Russia's core strategic interests. We might also conclude that he is wrong in his belief. This does not mean that NATO expansion is necessarily wrong, nor does it tell policy-makers how to deal with the problem. However, it does help policy-makers understand what lies behind Putin's behaviour, enables them to anticipate his likely response to future moves and throws light on possibilities for addressing his concerns or misperceptions. In short, empathy is an important tool in the crafting of foreign policy. The following section considers what role empathy has in the execution of such policies and in the management of international relations.

### **3. Empathy in Diplomacy**

This section summarises the role of empathy in diplomacy and highlights its role in enhancing understanding and strengthening relationships, including through demonstrations of respect or language skills. It also considers the role of empathy in managing diplomatic crises and in a country's cultural diplomacy.

Empathy is a core skill of diplomats, yet it is mostly unacknowledged and rarely admired. It helps diplomats enhance their understanding of other countries, especially powerful elites, but also the nation as a whole and groups within it. Diplomats, officials or politicians also use empathy to build personal relationships with counterparts. This enables them to exert influence and helps them to sustain friendly bilateral relations between states. For instance, an empathic relationship between Margaret Thatcher and Mikhail Gorbachev helped build much closer relations between the United Kingdom and Soviet Union in the late 1980s. In contrast, some Anglo-German summits over this period were more or less suspended because the leaders of both sides made no effort to empathize with each other.

Building a relationship often involves demonstrations of respect, affection or admiration. This can be done without empathy but it often helps. For instance, the late Robin Cook, U.K. Foreign Secretary from 1997 to 2001, went to some lengths to build strong relationships with foreign diplomats. He presided over an annual Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) exercise to find a costume jewellery brooch for his U.S. counterpart, Madeleine Albright, and tried to learn French in order to improve his relations with his French counterpart, Hubert Védrine. Cook was never able to acquire fluent French but Védrine's appreciation of his efforts took their relationship to another level.

Empathy cannot simply be switched on and requires knowledge and skills. Learning a local language not only demonstrates an appreciation, even affection, for a foreign country, but also enables diplomats to better understand and communicate with people of other cultures. This is especially important when diplomats are required to deliver difficult messages or administer 'tough love'. In that sense, applied empathy gives diplomats and decision-makers leverage that they wouldn't otherwise have.

Empathy between political leaders is essential in managing international relationships in times of conflict, tension and pressure, as illustrated by the fallout of the Brexit vote. Resentment and recriminations were rife amongst E.U. leaders who felt and still feel deserted at a time of vulnerability across Europe, given the multiple threats from terrorism, the Eurozone financial crisis and the rise of populism. They felt angry and betrayed by the United Kingdom, whose political leaders had argued strongly in favour of E.U. enlargement and the single market, but whose people ultimately objected to the implications.

Yet, many British complaints are justified. There is a widespread sense that the European Union has failed to live up to expectations, including on foreign and neighbourhood policy. E.U. leaders told Britain there could be no compromise on the ‘four freedoms’ of goods, services, people and capital. They insisted that Britain had to accept the unrestricted freedom of movement of E.U. citizens, while simultaneously, for domestic reasons, maintaining restrictions on the free movement of services. It is clear that leaders on both sides, the European Union and the United Kingdom, need to understand the perspective, grievances and sentiments of the other. It will inevitably be a very difficult period ahead – but far harder to manage if each side is unable to empathize.

Effective cultural diplomacy and other efforts to enhance foreign appreciation of a country’s culture, values and institutions, requires empathy. And while empathy may exist between diplomats, it is also possible to conceive of empathy between nations, especially those that have historical ties, shared cultures or demographic links, which itself affects diplomatic relations.

#### **4. Empathy in Conflict Resolution**

This section considers the role of empathy in a major area of policy-making and diplomacy: understanding, avoiding and resolving violent conflict. First, it considers the absence of empathy in violent conflict, then reviews the role of empathy as a tool of mediation, in promoting engagement, as a vehicle for enabling another party to feel recognised, in building trust, and in catalysing new approaches to conflict resolution.

Prevailing theories of political science do not always provide convincing explanations of human behaviour, especially with respect to the use of violence. In a number of cases the predications and hypotheses of theory do not seem to fit the facts. Importantly, the ability of human beings to make rational calculations about how to maximise their own interests is undermined by the trauma of conflict.<sup>3</sup>

To understand conflict, we need to recognise that, fundamentally, it is about the behaviour of human beings and groups of human beings. An appreciation of the psychology of these groups and their leaders, which empathy can help to provide, is essential. It is difficult to understand the psychology of people experiencing violent conflict if it is something that we ourselves have not experienced. We often assume the ‘other’ thinks the same way that we do, and in stable parts of the world groups broadly act on the basis of rational considerations or at least what the group conceives as such. However, in times of conflict and facing existential threat, people tend to operate as devoted actors – not always in their best social and economic interests but on the basis of transcendent or sacred values and emotions, which are difficult to measure.

Adversaries often stop seeing each other as human beings, which begins with a refusal to engage – even though engagement means only that, not friendship. Conflict undermines capacities for certain kinds of

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<sup>3</sup> This section of the paper is informed by the remarks of scholars John Alderdice and Gabrielle Rifkind.

thought, such as to distinguish between past and present and to empathize with others. Under threat, empathy is stifled by other powerful sentiments: fear, hatred and the desire for revenge. These emotions often lead to demonization, which reinforces the hostility of an individual or group towards the enemy and their determination to prevail by any means necessary.

### **Tool of mediation**

Empathy is a powerful analytical tool for those who engage in diplomatic and mediation work to resolve conflict because it throws light on why people fight – their mindset, motivations, driving emotions and objectives. It can illuminate values and beliefs – or the chaos in people’s hearts and minds during times of upheaval. It can reveal misperceptions or false assumptions that drive hostilities, fears that block engagement, as well as opportunities for negotiation.

Importantly, empathy can help practitioners analyse and address the troubled relationships between large groups of people. Group leaders, who typically represent something of the character of the group, should be a key focus. Skilled practitioners empathize with leaders and their groups – what’s going on inside their minds, what’s happening in their faction or community. The content of what they say alone is not enough to understand the group; attention must be given to the way something is being said. This enables diplomats and mediators to adapt any given process so that it takes into account differences in culture and politics, accommodates a group’s deep concerns and interests, and develops realistic options for compromise and agreement.

### **Engaging with enemies**

Empathy is closely connected to dialogue with adversaries. Of course, a party may decide to talk to adversaries without having empathized with them. But an empathic approach tends to cut through simplifications and stereotypes, which reduce a party’s willingness to talk. Conversely, seeing another party’s perspective and being aware of their rationale for confrontation – even if it is refuted – can increase a party’s willingness to engage. In fact, without a willingness to consider how the other side sees the world, and why they are behaving as they are, a party is likely to see only the other side’s hostility. Moreover, it is almost impossible to interact with others in any meaningful way without consciously or sub-consciously forming a conception of what’s going on inside their heads.

Some decision-makers believe that engagement gives an enemy legitimacy and fear a public backlash. But talks are often undertaken secretly and can be carried out by mid-ranking officials. Moreover, a central quality of leadership is to take decisions that, while unpopular, are in the collective interest. Indeed, there are powerful potential benefits of engaging with an enemy: it yields valuable information, creates internal pressure as moderates and hardliners debate how to respond, and lends credibility to moderates who favour dialogue. Engagement also forces the actor to take policy positions and engage politically. In the right circumstances it can ultimately resolve, reduce or avoid conflict. The cases of Afghanistan and Northern Ireland point towards the merits of engaging with one’s enemy, especially in the early stages of a conflict.

Any serious effort to empathize with Afghans brings to light why some opt to join the Taliban. In short, many join due to historic and cultural factors, deep political grievances and misperceptions of foreign aggression. Efforts to address the conflict must therefore involve engaging with members of the Taliban, not least to better understand their grievances, prevent the emergence of false assumptions and consider options for a political process. Yet, the United States and United Kingdom failed to do so. In fact, for several years Britain, taking its lead from the United States, barred its diplomats, including intelligence officials, from talking to the Taliban. Thus, no early channels of communication were established and the

United States and Britain reported on the Taliban without the nuance and depth of understanding that can only be acquired through direct engagement.

Britain's policy towards talks with the Taliban shifted during the late 2000s, but only after American objections abated due to growing concerns that the counterinsurgency strategy would not succeed. By the time the United States did engage in direct talks with the Taliban in late 2010, the mistrust between the two sides was deeply entrenched and the United States, having already announced its intention to withdraw, undercut Taliban incentives to negotiate.

To take a contrasting case, in Northern Ireland political leaders on both sides exercised political courage in deciding to talk to the enemy at early stages of the conflict, without which it may never have been resolved. In 1972 the U.K. Prime Minister Ted Heath authorised the Secret Intelligence Service to talk to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (the I.R.A.), which led to the establishment of a secret, high-level channel. In the early 1990s, John Major approved backchannel contacts with the I.R.A, which opened the way for Tony Blair's 1997 decision to engage in formal peace talks with Sinn Féin. Those talks eventually led to the Good Friday Agreement, which ended hostilities.

## **Recognition**

Empathy is a vehicle for enabling a party to feel heard, respected and understood. Disputes and conflicts are often intensified by the fact that one group feels that nobody is listening to them, that they are not being taken seriously and that their concerns and grievances are being dismissed. They feel they have no alternative but to fight. When an adversary or a third party empathizes with that party, it not only helps them to acquire a better understanding of the other, but it can also help to begin to mitigate the other's hostility. An actor that demonstrates empathy is usually seen by the other party as more intelligent, reasonable and trustworthy. This can also put mediators in a better position to engage in or facilitate negotiations.

At moments of political flux, and especially when one party feels vulnerable, an appreciation of their state of mind can help to shape an appropriate response and reduce the prospects for future conflict. For instance, some analysts believe that Putin's belligerent behaviour in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe is at least partly attributable to an enduring sense of humiliation at the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. That sense of grievance was not inevitable. The West could have framed the moment as a tremendous opportunity to work together to build a new world order to the benefit of all. Western leaders could have said that they could not do this alone and that they were ready to work with Russia in that endeavour. Instead, the West acted triumphantly and consolidated its position through the steady eastwards expansion of NATO. Failing to discern and adapt to Russia's state of mind laid the seeds for future discord.

## **Trust-building**

Many factors explain successful peace processes, such as the existence of a mutually hurting stalemate, geopolitical pressures and visionary leadership. Often, it is the parties' pursuit of their own interests that draws them into negotiations. In South Africa, it is arguable that Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk had little empathy for each other. What brought them together were hard political and economic interests. Both men had made a rational calculation of the costs and benefits of continued conflict, and concluded it was in their interests to reach a settlement. Indeed, without a negotiated accord, the African National Congress (ANC) might have eventually prevailed but inherited a disaster given the violent upheaval that would have involved.

Although in this and other cases, empathy does not explain why parties decide to negotiate, the bedrock of most peace processes is trust-building, in which empathy plays an important role. Trust involves belief in reliability and predictability of others. In other words, it involves expectations of another's behaviour. It would be irrational and imprudent to form such expectations without first seeking to grasp what is happening inside the others' minds – their thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

In South Africa, for instance, when Mandela and de Klerk realised that they themselves would be unable to negotiate a new constitution, they delegated the task to two of their most able lieutenants, Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer, respectively. A series of personal interactions and incidents helped them to build trust and rapport (including during a fishing trip they had taken due to a deadlock in talks). Their strong personal relationship underpinned efforts to develop a draft constitution, which was pivotal to ending the conflict.

Trust-building often draws on symbolic gestures, which require an appreciation of the other's state of mind. Iran expert Ellie Geranmayeh, writing below, shows how a series of gestures between Iranian and U.S. officials helped to reinforce personal relationships, which were the basis for talks on Iran's nuclear programme. To name but some: Kerry and Zarif's lakeside walk in Lausanne; Zarif's historic handshake with Obama; the condolences offered by the U.S. negotiating team to Rohani's brother on the death of his mother; the baby gifts given by U.S. Energy Secretary, Ernest J. Moniz, to Iranian nuclear chief, Ali Akbar Salehi, when he became a grandfather for the first time, which bore logos of their shared alma mater, M.I.T. Each of these steps had symbolic value, helped to build personal relationships and sent a message of confidence and respect to publics on both sides.

The United States and Iran even showed empathy in respect of their opponents' opponents. Each refrained from reacting to provocations by hardliners on the other side, such as when U.S. Senators wrote a public letter to the Iranian leadership in March 2015, stating that they would tear up any agreement. Thus, each party helped the other shape domestic public opinion and manage constituencies who were opposed to the process, which was crucial to securing a final agreement. Looking ahead, however, the fact that personal relationships underpinned the process underscores the need for such relationships to be institutionalised, especially in light of continuing strains on the United States-Iran relationship and inevitable changes in key officials.

This also underscores the point that building and maintaining trust requires predictable behaviour over a sustained period. During the Cold War generations of diplomats on all sides engaged in talks over many years which contributed to successful force reductions, such as related to SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks), Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions talks, and START (the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty). Many other issues were discussed in the context of the Helsinki Accords, including economics, military issues and human rights. These roundtables and dialogues – which required a degree of mutual empathy – all helped to sustain relations with the Soviet Union and ensure its eventual dissolution happened in a peaceful way, which could hardly have been expected given so many years of hostility.

### **Empathy as a Catalyst**

Empathy humanizes. A party that empathizes is usually able to see the other as a human being and to appreciate the thoughts and emotions they may be experiencing. This in itself has the potential to mitigate hatred and to elicit restraint in a party that is engaging in aggressive or cruel behaviour. It can also bring about a greater openness to reconciliation.

Taking an adversary's perspective can act as a catalyst for innovative and productive approaches to the conflict. All too often parties demand the confidence of the other side, without appreciating that they have to earn this confidence. They should sometimes be encouraged to ask not what their opponent can do for them but what they can do for their opponent. It requires empathy to understand your adversary's concerns and what it is that will enable them to move forward, potentially unblocking intractable conflict. In acquiring a better appreciation of what the other side really wants and the constraints and pressures it faces, often from powerful constituencies, empathy can also soften resistance to compromise, which is central to resolving conflict.

One example of empathy as a catalyst for new thinking is track 'one point five' (semi-official) efforts to facilitate talks in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict during the 2000s. On one occasion to help reframe the talks, facilitators invited the parties to conduct a role-play. Observed by the Abkhaz, Georgians role-played the Abkhaz discussing what would be acceptable to them in order to facilitate progress and what factors obstructed progress. Participants on both sides were stunned by how well the Georgians played the Abkhaz, creating a powerful resonance for those involved. Both sides' eyes were opened to factors that explained the other's behaviour. The insights derived from these discussions led to senior Georgian officials drafting a series of options for moving forward that were presented to the new Georgian President in 2004 and which informed negotiations under the auspices of the UN for the next two years.

In a different context, faltering talks between the government of the Philippines and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) were transformed when Benigno Aquino became President in 2010. He and his MILF interlocutor, Chairman Murad Ebrahim, met face to face in a confidential meeting in Tokyo and were able to establish a relationship which took into account each other's concerns and perspectives. This led to a reconfiguration of talks and underpinned new efforts that eventually resulted in a comprehensive peace agreement. The process hinged on many factors: the parties' realisation that they could not prevail militarily, new external conditions and the recognition of the political aspirations of the Bangsamoro people by the Government of the Philippines. But one important factor was the respective leaders' willingness to step into the other's shoes. This created a personal rapport and enabled individuals working with the leaders to undertake the meticulous process that led to the agreement.

## **5. Limitations and drawbacks**

Despite these various uses of empathy in international affairs, there are obvious limitations and drawbacks, seven of which are explored in this section.

First, and most obviously, a party may empathize but get it wrong, given the huge challenges in discerning another's mental state, emotions and perceptions. Yet, many kinds of information gathering, intelligence work or analysis, are difficult to accomplish with certainty and accuracy. That does not mean they are not worth doing.

Second, empathy can be exploited by those with malign intentions. For a party that engages in unjust or predatory behaviour, empathizing can help them to identify and exploit another's vulnerabilities. However, like virtually all analytical tools and skills, empathy can be misused. This does not detract from empathy's utility.

Third, a party may unduly empathize with another party on an arbitrary or discriminatory basis. Indeed, empathy for one's own group – for instance relating to the suffering they are forced to endure – can

increase the prospects of the use of violence against those seen as aggressors.<sup>4</sup> Again, these observations do not supersede or eclipse the potential positive uses of empathy. Rather, they suggest we should practice empathy in a deliberate, self-critical and managed way, mindful of whom we do and do not empathize with, and what we use it for.

Fourth, some see empathy as having the potential to undercut moral judgement. There are times when we must judge and act, rather than seek to understand. Of course this is true and, as a tool of understanding, empathy is no substitute for ethical evaluation or action. Still, it would be unwise to rush to judgment or indeed to take action before trying to understand.

Fifth, empathizing can make a party feel better about themselves, without resulting in any positive change in behaviour. This is quite feasible. Nevertheless, few practices can guarantee that a state will adopt better, fairer or more benign policies. And in potentially enabling a party to see how its policies are perceived by others, there is reason to believe that empathizing can generate pressure or incentives for positive policy change.

Sixth, individuals and groups who empathize in conflict may, through a better appreciation of the enmity or fear of an adversary, become even more disillusioned about the prospects for peace. Nevertheless, there is always a risk that greater understanding has negative effects. That does not mean that ignorance is preferable.

Finally, individuals may face social and political costs for empathizing during conflict, being at variance from and even defying wider narratives and attitudes which tend to disparage, vilify or demonize adversaries. But many kinds of behaviour, such as speaking truth to power or resisting oppression, involve risks and costs. That does not mean those risks and costs are not worth bearing. Whether or not those risks are worth bearing depends on many factors, including the potential benefits. Moreover, this strengthens the case for empathy to be more widely acknowledged and incorporated into standard practices rather than left to courageous individuals. In fact, none of the limitations or drawbacks noted above suggests that empathy should be rejected. Rather, that it should be practiced in a self-conscious and controlled fashion. It should be institutionalised.

## **6. Institutionalisation of Empathy**

Given the range of ways in which empathy can contribute to effective foreign policy-making, diplomacy and conflict resolution, and the fact that its limitations and drawbacks are manageable, this section considers the extent to which empathy has been institutionalised.

It is difficult to empathize with accuracy, especially during conflict, given the complexity, changing circumstances, ambiguity of information, access constraints and influence of propaganda. It also stands to reason that the more we differ from a given person, group of people or nation, the harder it is to empathize with them. The observation is borne out by recent western experience overseas in the Middle East and North Africa.

As noted above, empathizing requires a certain level of knowledge of the actors under consideration. But the ways in which most state agencies and institutions are often organised and managed inhibits the development of expertise. Personnel rules favour generalists and officials, diplomats and soldiers are

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<sup>4</sup> See 'Changing Minds: Briefing on Empathy in Mediation', Center for Empathy in International Affairs, April 2016.

frequently rotated between postings or overseas responsibilities. Risk aversion means that diplomats and other officials are often confined to fortified compounds, with restricted ability to travel and limited contact with foreign nationals.

Moreover, empathy is neither natural nor instinctive; it is a muscle that needs training. Academic evidence shows that training can enhance our ability to empathize.<sup>5</sup> But virtually no one exercising responsibilities in international affairs is trained in how to enhance their ability to empathize. Empathy could be incorporated into standard procedures but that is rare. Specialised units could be tasked with acquiring a deep appreciation of the mindset, emotions and perceptions of others. Arguably, foreign and intelligence services should undertake such tasks. However, in many cases and especially during overseas interventions, western intelligence agencies have been forced to prioritise operational objectives, such as for targeting or force protection, at the expense of efforts to build a deep understanding of allies and adversaries. Their work, such as relating to the invasion of Iraq, has been unduly influenced by political priorities. Thus, overall, empathy arises largely in an ad hoc, piecemeal and spontaneous way.

One way in which empathic approaches can be brought to bear on policy-making is through mechanisms designed to ensure that assumptions about others are tested by experts, alternative thinking is explored and dissent can be expressed. However, the impact of several such mechanisms in the U.K., described below, suggests that they are not effective in incorporating empathy into policy-making.

Since the Iraq War, the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) head of strategy occasionally organises ‘challenge sessions’, in which internal and external experts are brought in to give alternative points of view and challenge conventional wisdom. However, this does not happen frequently, rarely shapes strategy and is not fundamentally about applying empathy.

FCO research analysts, who are usually regional experts, are well-placed to challenge assumptions about others. But there are now fewer of them than previously and, not being centrally involved in policy-making, they are often marginalised. Even experienced foreign policy advisers attached to the Prime Minister’s office, such as the late diplomat Percy Cradock or former Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee Pauline Neville-Jones, are often unable to influence policy-making if they are outside the small circle of political decision-makers.

Partly to offset weaknesses in these mechanisms, in November 2011 the FCO established the ‘Locano Group’ of retired ambassadors, which was brought together intermittently to take part in policy-making discussions with the Foreign Secretary.<sup>6</sup> It was hoped that they could offer views based on experience and historical knowledge, with a greater degree of independence and without fear of professional disadvantage. However, the discussions were relatively short, the forum was not influential and it was difficult for participants to challenge policy without access to information available to serving officials. In some cases events moved too fast, such as with Libya, for the group to be properly consulted. The group was therefore discontinued.

Consideration of other western states suggests that genuinely empathic approaches are rarely institutionalised. In the United States, as in Britain, external experts are sometimes called on to advise on

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<sup>5</sup> ‘The Efficacy of Empathy Training: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials’, Emily Teding van Berkhout and John M. Malouff, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 2016, Vol. 63, No. 1, 32–41, and ‘Empathy Training: Methods, Evaluation Practices, and Validity’, Tony Chiu Ming Lam, Klodiana Kolomitro, Flanny C. Alamparambil, *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, July 2011, Volume 7, Number 16, 162-200.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Steele, ‘Chilcot Report: Foreign Office’, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 87, No. 4, October–December 2016.

policy. The U.S. State Department has a ‘dissent channel’ through which diplomats can express their objections to a stated policy. (It was activated by 51 diplomats who submitted a memorandum in June 2016 registering their objection to U.S. policy on Syria.) The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has a ‘Red Team’ that seeks to anticipate future threats and challenge conventional thinking. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) engages in war-gaming where one side plays the enemy. However, the CIA and DOD mechanisms are largely for operational purposes and none of them is expressly designed to take an empathic approach, focussing on the mindset, emotions and perceptions of others.

## **7. Obstacles to Empathy**

As discussed, empathy serves multiple purposes in international affairs. Many of the best decision-makers, diplomats and mediators are highly accomplished in empathizing. Yet it is rarely acknowledged, seldom features in training and is left largely to individual intuition. Why is this – what are the obstacles to acknowledging the role of empathy and applying it in practice? Some of the principal factors, which are interrelated and reinforcing, are: the bias of decision-makers towards a Manichean outlook, contemporary political culture, empathy’s association with sympathy, approval and disloyalty, and its association with emotions, weakness and inaction. These reasons and their validity are explored below.

### **Manichaeism**

As noted above, in times of conflict, warring parties are prone to demonize adversaries, which creates resistance to empathy. The conditions for this are often created through a psychological phenomenon known as ‘fundamental attribution error’ by which decision-makers tend to attribute a perceived adversary’s behaviour to intrinsic hostility rather than to circumstances, and overlook ways in which their own behaviour may have contributed to their adversary’s conduct. This can happen on both sides of a conflict, making spirals of hostility more likely, and condemnations of perceived hostility, repeated enough, can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Intense and protracted hostility tends toward a Manichean conception of the relationship: we are good and the enemy is evil. Consider, for instance, George Bush’s ‘Axis of Evil’ and his mantra ‘you are either with us or against us’. It is rooted in intrinsic human biases towards simplification, preserving self-esteem and reinforcing our own self-image. Over time, confirmation bias reinforces our image of the enemy; denial and self-deception reinforce the image we have of ourselves. This is sometimes bolstered by the calculations of leaders who see political advantages in a perceived Manichean state of affairs: it can strengthen their domestic popularity, amplify a personal and collective sense of virtue, and provide a justification for the expansion of powers or for taking decisions that might otherwise be opposed. Once the paradigm is established, it is compounded by hostile rhetoric, propaganda, partisan media coverage and jingoistic sentiment, all of which are prevalent during wartime or other periods of tension and hostility.

Having demonized our enemies, it is regarded as either immoral or pointless to try to understand and empathize with them. Demonization itself defines and explains our enemies, obviating the need for further understanding. The paradigm may to varying degrees be justified by the facts. By an objective measure, some regimes or non-state groups are predatory, rapacious or cruel. But in most cases it is an oversimplification. Manichaeism overlooks the possibility that the enemy’s conception of the conflict may mirror ours. It obscures the fact that even malign actors, or those who use nefarious means, may have legitimate grievances or valid points of view. Furthermore, our own behaviour may not be blameless and partly responsible for the behaviour of others.

The overall dynamics of Manichaeism reinforce the tendency of leaders to conceive of policy towards adversaries as a binary choice: do we try to understand them or do we oppose them? This is a false dichotomy: effective opposition *requires* understanding. Yet, faced with this apparent choice, contemporary political leaders tend to opt for confrontation for reasons explored below.

### **Leadership and political culture**

Empathy requires a degree of open-mindedness, an appreciation of nuance and complexity, and a willingness to devote time and effort to understanding others' perspectives. It also requires political courage – a willingness to do the right thing despite likely criticism. Yet, such qualities that are not always found in political leaders and contemporary political culture seems to work against empathy.

Contemporary liberal democracies have a mixed record in electing leaders who approach issues from a thoughtful point of view and reach judgements based on a consideration of all relevant information. As recent U.S. and European elections indicate, large numbers of voters are drawn to politicians who claim they know the answers to all problems, disregard or distort the facts, and make specious promises. This is reinforced by an increasing tendency for politicians to disdain or ignore those with expertise.

Furthermore, today's highly competitive and polarising political culture seems to marginalise politicians who present a balanced view or try to understand the arguments and concerns of their opponents. Acknowledging that an opponent may have valid points is seen as a gaffe. This was evident in the fractious debate in the run up to the Brexit vote. The outcome also reflected the failure of the political elite to empathize with a large segment of the population who were increasingly resentful and concerned about rising levels of immigration.

Empathizing tends to work in favour of engaging with adversaries, which is arguably the most practical manifestation of empathy. As discussed above, there are compelling reasons to do so, and the case of Afghanistan illustrates the risks of engaging too late. Yet, given that engaging enemies is widely associated with weakness and appeasement, it can involve short term political costs. The unwillingness of politicians to absorb such costs and prioritize policy over popularity contributes to a political culture that is resistant to empathy.

There is a strong case that authoritarian societies, in which multiple viewpoints are suppressed, are even more prone to failures of empathy than liberal societies. As Lawrence Freedman writes below in a case study on the Ukraine crisis, Putin was unable to grasp the force and nature of the Euromaidan movement that emerged in opposition to President Yanukovich and Ukraine's political old guard. This led him to misjudge the strength of the opposition movement, the speed with which Yanukovich would be removed, and the lack of public support for a counter-revolution in the East, which he had sought to manufacture. Putin and the system around him lack empathy, which has adverse consequences for policy-making.

### **Association with sympathy, approval and disloyalty**

As noted above, empathy has been conflated with sympathy and in some disciplines it has been taken to mean a sharing of another's feelings. Yet, in international affairs, empathy can be considered in its cognitive sense and practiced as an analytical tool that does not require the sharing of feelings.

Articulating the need for empathy can lead to the accusation by politicians, press, commentators, and civil servants of being or becoming too close to the other side, and losing sight of your own side's cause, interests or values. This is one of the reasons diplomats are so frequently moved between countries. There is a suspicion of too much understanding. But understanding how others think and feel or see things does

not mean we approve of them or take their side. The detective must understand the criminal, the psychologist may need to understand the psychopath. It does not mean they lose their own values. Likewise, trying to understand others does not mean officials will simply abandon longstanding loyalties or beliefs. Moreover, any misgivings need to be weighed against the potential gains and the risks of decision-making in the absence of deep understanding. Furthermore, empathizing only needs to be done by certain officials at certain times.

### **Association with emotions**

Empathy tends to be conceived as a sentimental, non-rational impulse. That may be true in some cases, especially in everyday circumstances. Empathy can evoke feelings of pity or sorrow for those who are suffering. But empathy can also be practiced in a deliberate, detached and purposive way. And it can be used to comprehend another's state of being – not only another's emotions but also their mindset and perspective.

The marginalisation of emotions, and psychology more broadly, is at least partly due to general human biases towards order, predictability, comprehensibility and measurability. These are not qualities we associate with emotions. Indeed, decision-makers and analysts in international affairs, especially men, are biased towards data that can be measured, defined and visualised. For instance, quantitative indicators or 'metrics' were used prolifically by decision-makers during the U.S.-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, but yielded little or no strategic benefit. Measurability is no proxy for utility.

Empathy has also been overlooked by theoretical approaches to international relations that involve assumptions about rationality and focus on the pursuit of power, interests and security. While these approaches have a huge role in explaining the behaviour of states and other actors in international affairs, they are incomplete. We know that emotions and perceptions shape and influence the behaviour of leaders and groups, especially during times of conflict. It would be *irrational* not to try to understand these forces. It is therefore entirely rational to use empathy to help us discern and assess both the rational and non-rational factors that explain human behaviour. Information about how an adversary thinks, feels and perceives may be critical for determining strategy.

### **Association with weakness and inaction**

Empathy tends to be associated with weakness and 'femininity'. There is an assumption that it does not solve problems, favours appeasement and even inhibits action. Rather, politicians tend to be at pains to exhibit decisive action, believing it will elicit public approval. But history's greatest strategists and generals have long recognised the need to understand the enemy. Every undertaking requires a rational assessment of the best course of action. Empathizing is no substitute for this, nor is it an impediment to action. Moreover, if action is taken without an appreciation of how others will react, for which empathy provides crucial insights, it runs the risk of being costly, ineffective and even counter-productive.

At an international level, empathy faces the same obstacle as diplomatic protocol: those who matter don't care; those who care don't matter. Partly due to U.S. strategic culture, its military dominance and reliance on technology, the American establishment gives little weight to empathy. Some officials in smaller nations, such as Britain, better appreciate the need for diplomats to acquire a deep understanding of others. The same pattern may be observed within states. But the costs of U.S. foreign policy decisions, uninformed by a deep understanding of others, strongly suggest that even the powerful need to give attention to empathy.

## **8. Recommendations**

Empathy is a diverse, complex concept, of increasing interest to thinkers, researchers and practitioners. It has limitations and drawbacks. Empathy can never constitute the sole or even principal basis for foreign policymaking; nor does it tell decision-makers what to do. It is no substitute for the wide range of conventional tools used in diplomacy and conflict resolution.

However, empathy helps to inform foreign policy-making, especially by providing insights into how other actors are likely to act or react in any given circumstances and exposing false assumptions that can sometimes underpin strategic mistakes. Empathy is a core diplomatic skill and can strengthen international relations. Empathy also helps to resolve and prevent violent conflict through its role in mediation, engagement, trust-building, recognition and as a catalyst for new approaches.

For a range of reasons, none of which is convincing, empathy has been neglected in the policy and practice of international affairs. The massive human and financial costs of western foreign policy errors over the past two decades, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, suggest we can ill afford to overlook this important tool. Given the range and immensity of international challenges, not least the war in Syria, increasing tensions with Russia, the rise of Salafi jihadism, and the effects of climate change, decision-makers need all available tools at their disposal.

Empathy has a broader role to play in mitigating fear and mistrust in society and overcoming rifts between groups that could easily become enemies. Given the pressures created by globalization, rising populism, racism and nationalism, when liberal values are under threat, and when understanding others is increasingly seen as weak and unnecessary, empathy is needed now more than ever.

The question is not whether empathy is a good thing but how it can be institutionalised. To this end the following five steps could make a difference.

### **1. Acknowledge the role of empathy**

The tone and direction from the top is essential. Politicians and decision-makers should publicly acknowledge the importance of empathy, conceived as efforts to grasp what others think, feel and perceive. They should argue that far from being weak, sentimental or appeasing, it is firmly in our interests and entirely rational to acquire a deep understanding of others. They should argue that this enables them to make better decisions and to avoid costly errors. Ultimately, the United Nations Security Council should recognise the importance of empathy in international relations and the work of the UN itself. An expert taskforce should be established to operationalize empathy in the work of UN agencies, peacekeeping operations and political missions.

### **2. Enhance expertise and engage**

Governments should change the way they operate overseas in order to reduce obstacles to empathy. They should build and develop teams of regional and country specialists, rather than favouring revolving generalists. Extended, repeated and regional tours should be encouraged, language training enhanced and constraints on movements reduced so that diplomats can engage with others more easily over longer periods. They should establish mechanisms to ensure that information gathering is not unduly influenced by operational or political priorities. Decision-makers should reject the idea that talking to adversaries equates to approving or conferring legitimacy. It should be standard practice to engage with enemies, at whatever level and frequency is appropriate.

### **3. Institute training**

Professionals who work in international affairs, especially those in the field, including diplomats, UN officials, NGO practitioners, mediators and peace-builders, should undergo training in empathizing. Such training should be adapted according to the relevant area of practice and include consideration of how empathy is deployed alongside other relevant skills.

### **4. Standardise procedures**

Empathy should be incorporated into standard operating and decision-making procedures. Any major decision should require an empathic assessment of those whom it is likely to affect. This would involve analysis of the thoughts, feelings and perspectives of affected actors, based on deep social, cultural and historical knowledge, as well as direct engagement. It would involve consideration of how they are likely to react to any given measure. Such an approach would apply to any decision of significance, whether it relates to the deployment of forces or dispersal of funds.

### **5. Establish specialised units**

Specialised units should be established within foreign ministries or international organisations, tasked with acquiring a deep appreciation of the mindset, emotions and perceptions of others. Staffed by experts, such units could draw on the knowledge and insights that exist in diverse disciplines and communities. They would produce tailored assessments relating to any given decision, drawing on a wide range of sources, especially independent field research, analysis and academic studies of the culture, sociology, ethnography and history of a country or region, as well as biographies of key decision-makers. The members of such units should be empowered to participate, at an appropriate stage, in all decision-making processes.

### **6. Incorporate empathy into mediation**

Empathy should become a standard element of mediation training and a core component of mediation support. It should be introduced into mediation organisations and into the mediation support units of international organisations, including the United Nations, European Union, Africa Union, and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. These units should, as part of their work, ensure that there are sustained efforts to acquire a deep understanding of all relevant parties.

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## CASE STUDIES

### **Lack of Empathy and the Bloodshed in Iraq**

*By Jonathan Steele, a former Chief Foreign Correspondent for the Guardian and the author of several books on international relations, including 'Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq'.*

These remarks consider the role of empathy in the context of the Iraq war, and in particular, the pre-war planning and the handling of the intervention in its early stages.

Few would deny that after the fall of Saddam Hussein the occupation was far more chaotic than George W. Bush or Tony Blair expected. Blair himself has conceded that. It's also generally acknowledged (though not by Blair or Bush) that some big mistakes were made, not least the disbanding of the Iraqi army and the dismissal of every administrator in the civil service who had been a senior figure of the Baath party, whether they were ideologues or, more likely, professional technocrats who had joined the party out of necessity for career reasons.

But what of the other serious problems which arose during the occupation? These are often put down to the so-called Law of Unintended Consequences. It's a convenient alibi. Many things which are conveniently described as unintended consequences should more accurately be described as unacknowledged consequences.

In Iraq many of the challenges which undermined the occupation were flagged up in advance by experts but the British and US governments did not acknowledge the validity of the warnings they were given. They were set on their chosen strategy of regime change and brushed criticism aside.

Consider the three factors which created turmoil in post-Saddam Iraq. These were, first, the rise to political dominance of Iraq's Shia parties and religious leaders; second, their generally suspicious and non-co-operative attitude to the foreign occupiers; and, third, the eruption of armed resistance not just from Sunnis, upset at losing power, but from Shias as well. All of these trends were predicted before the war by academic experts, journalistic commentators, and retired diplomats but they were not taken seriously enough in Whitehall or Washington. The reason was that officials lacked empathy. Had they had some empathy they might have treated the warnings properly.

Empathy is an important tool in mediation – in getting inside the various parties' skins, and understanding not just their culture and history but their psychological baggage, their sense of grievance, their fears of impending betrayal.

Empathy is equally important as an ingredient in good planning, especially if a government is taking the extreme measure of intervening militarily in another country. There is a need for what I would call "empathy for the sake of harm-avoidance". Before taking military action in a foreign conflict any government or political leader, and this includes those on the UN Security Council, should first consider whether they will be causing greater harm. Will a foreign intervention, whether it is in Iraq, Libya, Syria or Afghanistan, run the risk of making an ongoing conflict, whether it is an armed uprising or a full-scale civil war worse, not better?

Can governments be sure they are avoiding creating further harm? Before launching an intervention it is vital for any government as well as the UN Security Council to have completed a properly researched

Political Impact Assessment and an equally well-researched Humanitarian Impact Assessment. Empathy is crucial to ensure that such assessments are accurate and useful.

In the case of Iraq one of the biggest mistakes was to think that Iraq's Shias would unreservedly welcome a Western occupation. They might welcome Saddam's removal but not wish for a prolonged occupation, which would inevitably raise suspicions about the foreigners' motives and intentions. Bush, Blair and their advisers did not understand the psychological wounds which remained from earlier British and Western interference in southern Iraq. They thought the Shias' hatred of Saddam would lead to Britain and the US being treated unequivocally as liberators. They did not know that Shias had vigorously resisted Britain's take-over of the country from the retreating Ottoman Empire in 1917. They did not bother to find out that the ancestors of some of the religious party leaders of 2003 had led an armed uprising against the British in 1920. Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for War, ordered the Royal Air Force to bomb the insurgents into submission. Britain then further inflamed Shia anger by imposing a foreign non-Iraqi Sunni as Iraq's King in 1921.

In 2002 and 2003, as they planned their invasion, Bush and Blair failed to take on board a more recent historical episode which had angered Iraq's Shia communities. In 1991 the Americans used force to drive Saddam's army out of Kuwait. With the Iraqi army destroyed or in retreat from Kuwait, President George Bush Senior urged the Shias to rise up in Basra and other southern Iraqi cities against Saddam's troops. But when Saddam unexpectedly found reserves and sent helicopter gunships to mow the Shia resistance down, Bush did nothing to help. No wonder that most Shias felt betrayed by the Americans. Memories are long and in 2003 when Bush Junior invaded Iraq the wounds left by Bush's father's betrayal were still fresh in many people's minds.

If only Washington and Whitehall had shown some empathy they would have realised that the dominant emotion among Iraqi Shias towards Britain and the United States in 2003 would not be gratitude for liberation but suspicion, scepticism, and the expectation of a new betrayal. The Brits and the Americans should not have been surprised that Shia militias took up arms against them in Basra and Baghdad.

Consider a second episode from the Iraq war: the political rise of the young Shia cleric, Moqtada al Sadr. The first part of this Insight discussed the need for empathy for the sake of harm-avoidance during political planning; we now come to the issue of empathy in administration.

One of the most impressive sights that I and other reporters saw when we reached Baghdad in April 2003 was young Shia clerics trying to stem the looting of public buildings, shops, and private homes. They were far from successful, of course, but we saw roadblocks close to mosques in various parts of Baghdad where cars were checked to see if they were carrying looted goods. TV sets, computers, and other items were confiscated and taken into the mosques if the driver could not prove they were his. The mosques were also taking donations of food to distribute to the poor.

Over subsequent weeks it became clear that many of these clerics were congregating around a young man, Moqtada al Sadr, who was the 29-year-old son of a distinguished ayatollah who had been assassinated by Saddam's thugs. Reporters like myself found it easy to go into Sadr city and interview these clerics. The American occupiers were busy trying to establish a central government over Iraq. Running Baghdad was a secondary concern. In the absence of local government, Moqtada's people were acting as a substitute administration in several Baghdad suburbs. This was particularly the case in the poor run-down and overcrowded eastern district of Baghdad, which used to be called Saddam City and had been renamed Sadr City.

There was a strong element of class tension in the turmoil which followed Saddam's removal. Sadr city was largely peopled by poor rural migrants from the south, and their descendants, who had moved to Baghdad in the hope of jobs in the industrial modernisation which Saddam had promoted with the help of oil revenues since the mid-1970s. With Saddam gone, the people of Sadr City wanted an improvement in their life-chances. Many of them were suspicious of the elitist leaders of the established Shia political parties. Moqtada seemed to them a more sympathetic figure and he soon acquired a devoted and loyal following.

If the Americans had had any empathy in their administration they would have tried to learn what made Moqtada tick and why he was so popular. But Moqtada was no friend of US power. He denounced the occupation and demanded that it end. This hardly made him a figure whom the Americans would willingly approach, however necessary it was. Secondly, as I just pointed out, he represented a lower-class and largely young clientele, not the sort of group which middle-aged and middle- and upper-middle-class US or British diplomats and administrators regularly encounter. They preferred the middle-aged and middle-class Shia leaders from the Dawa party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (known as SCIRI). When these Iraqi leaders criticised Moqtada al-Sadr as a wild upstart, it was easy for the Americans to agree.

Instead of practising empathy and trying to understand Moqtada's background and appeal, the Americans demonised him. They refused to talk to him and did their best to undermine him. The only issue for debate in US circles was whether Moqtada was a Fascist or a Bolshevik. In his memoirs Jerry Bremer, the US overlord and head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, referred to Moqtada as "a Bolshevik Islamist who understood only one thing, raw power, and who would stop at nothing to get it". Larry Diamond, who was one of the more liberal US officials, described Sadr's followers as a "malignant cancer". He wrote in his memoirs: "There was a fascist tone to all the street action and thuggery which was meant to terrorise enlightened people and persecute ethnic minorities".

I won't go into detail on what followed, except to say that when in July 2003 Moqtada set up a militia, known as the Mahdi army, the Americans continued to ostracise him. A few months later, they turned to repression. Moqtada's newspaper was closed down. He was arrested. Not surprisingly this provoked armed resistance by Moqtada's militia and for a month in April 2004 the city of Najaf was the site of full-scale battles between the militia and the Americans. The lesson is clear. If only there had been empathy, much bloodshed could have been avoided.

## **Atomic Empathy – US-Iranian Diplomacy Behind the Nuclear Deal**

*By Ellie Geranmayeh, Policy Fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations.*

The story of Iran-United States relations, since as far back as the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, is one of a succession of missed opportunities. While many in Iran considered Khatami's presidency as a real chance to take forward a reformist agenda, most Western countries did not view Khatami as a sufficiently reliable interlocutor. Under the George W. Bush presidency, the United States labelled Iran as part of the "axis of evil", burning the bridges of collaboration built between the West and Iran during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. This Western stance on Iran also contributed to a hard-line backlash in Tehran, culminating in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election as president in 2005. In contrast, under the presidency of Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani, last year's nuclear deal provided a rare case of genuine leadership to push forward diplomacy on advancing global security. In reaching this goal, empathy and leadership played a significant role, particularly in the way negotiators from Iran and the United States interacted with one another.

First, a combination of empathy and leadership helped establish the secret Omani channel of dialogue between U.S. and Iranian officials, initiated before President Rouhani was elected. These talks paved the way for direct engagement between the United States and Iran on the nuclear issue. The empathic approach of Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, in providing a safe platform for these delicate talks, should not be forgotten. He brought the United States and Iran together in secrecy, which was necessary after years of outright hostility. Key figures, such as U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns, safeguarded the process, which provided the foundation for subsequent, more open negotiations.

Second, the relationship between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif involved and demonstrated empathy in full. They each understood the popular psyche and domestic politics of the other's country. Zarif's time in the US, both as a student and as Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations, enabled him to understand the competing forces in U.S. politics, opposition to the nuclear talks and how this influenced Congress. This enabled Zarif to interpret U.S. domestic politics in a way that could not have been expected of the Iranian leadership. Early on in the negotiations, both the United States and Iran knew what the ultimate outcome of the deal was going to be, in terms of the framework, technicalities and bottom lines. What followed was an exercise by Kerry and Zarif to sell the deal to their own domestic politicians and populations. This was ambitious, as hard-line leaderships on both sides were deeply sceptical and anxious.

The negotiation process illustrated how small human gestures can make a big difference – such as the famous Geneva riverside walk by Kerry and Zarif, and Zarif's historic handshake with Obama at the margins of the UN General Assembly in 2015. When Rouhani's mother passed away at the height of the negotiations in Lausanne in March 2015, the top US negotiating team went to see Rouhani's brother, who was part of the Iranian delegation, to offer their condolences. This included Wendy Sherman, who just two years before had testified to Congress that "deception is part of the DNA" of Iranians negotiating over the nuclear programme. Each of these steps helped to humanize each of the two sides, and they were supplemented by an unprecedented level of contact between Kerry and Zarif. Kerry reportedly logged more calls to Zarif than to any other Foreign Minister during the course of the nuclear talks.

Third, there was "scientific empathy" between US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz and Ali Akbar Salehi, head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation, who developed a common understanding based on the technicalities and science behind the nuclear talks. They had both been students in the United States at MIT, and shared a background of scientific education, which meant they were able to sit together, put

aside their political differences, and negotiate difficult technical issues. This was key in moving talks forward. Salehi became a grandfather during talks and at the subsequent round of talks, in March 2015, Moniz presented him with baby presents bearing MIT logos. Creating headlines in Iran and the United States, it helped underline their shared human common ground.

Through a shared commitment to diplomacy, Kerry and Zarif successfully developed a win-win paradigm, which was important to secure, sell and deliver on a final agreement. Iran had always insisted on its legitimate ground for enrichment, as a matter of national pride in the country's scientific advancement. For the United States, the ultimate aim was containing the high threshold of enrichment by Iran, which what was widely seen by the West as a threat to stability in the Middle East. During the negotiations, Kerry and Zarif were both careful not to undermine the other's position by over-reacting to criticism from hardliners on the other side. For instance, when GOP senators wrote to the Iranian leadership saying that they would tear up the deal, both Zarif and Rouhani essentially dismissed the letter as a matter of internal politics of the U.S. administration. Likewise, Kerry and Obama largely ignored a sustained backlash from hardliners in Iran.

The negotiations also highlight a rare alignment between Obama and Rouhani as key personalities who understood the importance of diplomacy and empathy. Obama's policy on Iran was guided by notions of 'mutual interest' and 'mutual respect'. Since the start of his tenure, Rouhani, who has been perceived by many as a relatively moderate leader, sought to secure a more positive relationship between Iran and the United States and move the two countries away from perpetual enmity. In this sense, timing was important – the two leaders opened up possibilities for rapprochement and pushed forward with this agenda despite huge internal opposition.

The Iran nuclear talks also provide an example of how outside actors can promote empathy between two adversaries. At the beginning of talks, and to a lesser extent later on, European diplomats were useful in helping to balance relations between the United States and Iran and to diffuse tensions. The Europeans played an important role in damage limitation when opposition groups in Iran and the United States tried to undermine the talks. The frequent presence of European diplomats in both Tehran and Washington throughout the recent period of talks also helped to consolidate diplomatic efforts.

Since the nuclear deal was agreed, there are questions about how far the recent détente between Iran and the West, in particularly the United States, can go. Moreover, if the nuclear agreement was safeguarded by particular leaders, what will happen when Kerry and Zarif leave office? Empathic relationships need to be institutionalised – which does not seem to have happened in the case of the United States and Iran. There are also concerns about what lessons the West draws from the nuclear deal. In Iran there is a strong sense that the West still wants to isolate Iran, despite the easing of sanctions, given the slow pace of Iran's reintegration into global economic platforms. On-going efforts are required to ensure that this disillusionment does not impair future relations with Tehran in ways that could limit the potential for greater diplomatic achievements, most notably on regional security.

## **Eyes Half Shut – Failures of Strategic Empathy in Afghanistan**

*By Chris Kolenda, Senior Military Fellow, King's College London. Chris recently served as the Senior Advisor on Afghanistan and Pakistan to the US Department of Defense and has served four tours of duty in Afghanistan.*

Sun Tzu said know your enemy and know yourself, and this is illustrated in numerous cases identified by Lawrence Freedman in his landmark work, *Strategy*. Your strategy will be flawed if you fail to understand your adversaries or partners, and are unable to see yourself through the eyes of others.

Insurgencies tend to succeed if they develop durable internal and external support and the host nation government loses legitimacy. Inadequate strategic empathy by the United States in Afghanistan exacerbated both problems.

In many ways outlined below, the United States misjudged allies, enemies and others. Greater empathy – a willingness and ability to get inside the minds of others – might have helped to avoid these misjudgements, which had a serious, adverse impact on the ground.

In Afghanistan, the United States failed to make a distinction between the Taliban and al Qaida until 2009 – eight years into conflict – and only distinguished between the two groups at policy level one year later, when the Taliban and al Qaida sanctions lists were separated. The United States aggregated its enemies, treating both groups as terrorists, and failed to seize early negotiating opportunities in 2001, 2002 and 2004, when representatives of the Taliban made overtures for peace talks. Later, the United States misunderstood how the Taliban were making major efforts to win the battle of legitimacy in rural areas, especially after 2009, combining intimidation with persuasion.

The United States was also unaware of how purported partners manipulated international forces into attacking political rivals. Northern Alliance factions saw Hizb-i Islami, an Islamist armed group, as a serious strategic threat and misled US troops into believing that Hizb-i Islami leaders were in fact Taliban or al Qaida. Some U.S. forces were also duped into backing people whom they mistakenly believed to be community leaders, which led to local alliances against U.S. forces and their local partners.

In the early years of the intervention, U.S. forces did not appreciate how widespread civilian harm caused by warlords and militias played a major role in the resurgence of the Taliban. Predatory actors filled the security vacuum and Afghans in many areas soon came to look back to the Taliban as a preferable alternative for providing security.

Broadly speaking, the United States failed to grasp Pakistan's strategic fears, especially of Indian influence in Afghanistan, which led to Pakistani support for the Taliban, making it significantly more difficult to overcome the insurgency.

For too long the United States was unaware of how Afghan partners took advantage of U.S. naiveté and largesse to amass huge personal fortunes and establish a sophisticated kleptocracy. Nor did the United States see how U.S. empowerment of local warlords undermined President Karzai. The United States neglected to build a consensus on good governance, offer assistance on how to tackle corruption and help manage those who would be threatened by such efforts.

Lack of empathy also derailed efforts towards reconciliation, as the United States misunderstood the reasons why the Taliban sought to engage in talks. No meaningful effort was made to build a consensus on reconciliation within the U.S. government and amongst allies and partners. The United States completely

alienated Karzai through its efforts in this regard, especially the disastrous opening of a Taliban political office. This is when Taliban leaders attempted to open an office in Qatar in June 2013, which had a Taliban flag and a sign referring to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, provoking a furious reaction from the Afghan government. Mismanagement of this effort, in many ways due to a lack of empathy, brought about something that no other actor has been able to achieve: it got the Taliban, President Karzai, Pakistan's elite, the Afghan polity, international community, both Houses of Congress and both U.S. political parties all on same page – in agreement that the United States could not be trusted with regard to the peace process.

Crucially, the United States failed to see itself and its actions through the eyes of others, often assuming the most favourable interpretation of its most problematic actions. Officials were unable to see how the United States often undermined its own efforts.

In Nuristan, where I served as a U.S. commander, empathy was a key factor in bringing about a local peace process, through which local shuras and Afghan leaders, supported by U.S. forces, were able to convince a key Hizb-i Islami leader and his followers to stop fighting, and to begin working together on areas of mutual interest. He later reconciled with the Afghan government and remains an important supporter. Sadly, cases of this kind were uncommon.

Improving U.S. policies and performance in remote conflict zones will be a challenge. We should accept that Washington, D.C. is unlikely to have sufficient strategic understanding and empathy to be able to manage all potential problems in remote conflict areas, where we have little connection and on-the-ground presence. Furthermore, the United States government decision-making process is entirely too centralised for nuanced approaches. Bringing a greater degree of empathy into our strategy and policy-making will require significant political capital and involve major audience costs – in other words, resistance to what is seen as a conciliatory approach. In the absence of such a shift, U.S. strategy needs to be sensitive to its limitations and lack of understanding, and develop ways to identify, and then to prevent or mitigate, associated strategic risks.

## **Tectonic Tremors – The Ukraine Crisis and Multiple Failures of Empathy**

*By Sir Lawrence Freedman, Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King's College London.*

All political leaders find it difficult to understand ground-level political movements, and this is the case for those leading authoritarian states. Consider President Putin's response to the "colour revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia of the early 2000s. By one account, the origin of the Ukraine crisis is President Putin's concern about the expansion of NATO and the EU, with these revolutions seen largely as western plots. This account is reinforced by the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, which spoke about potentially bringing Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, and which was soon followed by a Russian push to consolidate its enclaves within Georgia of Ossetia and Abkhazia.

From Putin's point of view we can recognise that he may have seen this as gradually threatening Russia's independent political system, of which he was at the centre. He may have seen the 2011-2 demonstrations in Moscow as a continuation of this threat. This is what led to closure of foreign NGOs, a clampdown on the press, growing authoritarianism and intimidation of opposition leaders.

Being empathic, we can see that these factors help explain how he reacted when Ukraine emerged as a major issue 2013. Ukraine was about to make a critical decision: whether to accede to the European Union's offer of an Association Agreement, or to opt for the Eurasian Union, which meant accepting that Ukraine was part of Russia's sphere of influence. Putin even offered a US \$15 billion loan to incentivise the latter. Subsequent events led to the Ukrainian revolution, with his client President Viktor Yanukovich fleeing from Kyev and anti-Russian elements taking over.

Broadly, that is probably Putin's perspective on the crisis, and more or less how he has described it himself. But did it represent a real understanding of the political movements that had led to this point? Did he understand why former members of the Warsaw pact and even of the Soviet Union preferred to be in a Western sphere of influence rather than in his? The Russian belief in the ability of an elite to manipulate the masses should not be underestimated. They have long believed in information warfare – precision guided efforts to change people's thinking – and suspect that it could be used against them even as they clumsily try to use it against their opponents.

Did Putin empathize with Ukrainians and could he understand why the uprising happened? This is especially important as the "Euromaidan" revolution was quickly characterized by Russia as a fascist movement manipulated by the far right. It is true that the far right was involved, but the wellspring of the opposition was an anti-corruption movement – not something to which Putin would be sympathetic. A security challenge for Russia therefore arises from any ground level political movement, because it poses a challenge to the underpinnings of Putin's government. He was forced to demonize the movement, because if he accepted it as legitimate he would have problems of another kind.

In this way, Putin is a victim of the discourse trap identified by Jeff Michaels: the more an actor keeps describing things in a particular way, and possibly believes them, the more they limit their policy options. The more that Putin was understanding Euromaidan in these terms, the more he (a) was not prepared for the speed and enthusiasm with which Yanukovich would be forced out, and (b) the less he understood how the rest of Ukraine was going to respond.

He appears to have believed that what was happening from late February–March 2014 in Kyev was creating the potential for a counter-revolution, particularly in the East. But the potential was limited and it did not materialise – Crimea, which, hosting a Russian naval base, was an exceptional case. So Putin

attempted to manufacture a counter-revolution in the Donbass, the eastern most region of Ukraine, but it did not really get traction. The larger point here is the difficulty of recognising what makes political movements move. If they are mischaracterised at the start, policy responses are likely to be inept and counter-productive. This is what happened to Putin. Now he is stuck in Eastern Ukraine, which is in political limbo, and without far bolder moves than he is able to contemplate he is unable to get out.

Was the Western response to the Ukraine crisis empathetic? Policy-makers generally did understand where Putin was coming from but there were two flaws. First, once the West found itself in an antagonistic relationship with Russia, having largely gotten along for over a decade, we created our own discourse trap. The West described what was going on in Ukraine in largely polarised terms, as “goodies and baddies”, which meant that the problems of corruption in Ukraine were played down (until recently) and the potential tensions between Moscow and the separatist leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk were also played down. The corruption issue became inescapable. The separatist issue was harder to make out, because the leaders were materially dependent upon Moscow, who could have them replaced. Yet they had their own character and interests. Though reasonably assumed to be Russian puppets, which is what Putin wanted them to be, structurally, in their position, they had other interests. Notably, in no circumstances did they wish to be integrated back into Ukraine. They enjoyed their artificial autonomy for the power, and in some cases criminal opportunities, it gave them. Putin has a similar problem with Assad in Syria, who is now dependent upon Russia but also knows that Putin dare not dump him. It is not easy to be the puppet master: proxies or clients have their own interests and leverage. The credibility of their patron depends on them not failing.

Second, we insufficiently understood a problem that arose in 1980 in Afghanistan. Once an actor does something aggressive but principally for defensive purposes, there is a tendency to assume they are capable and have the intention of acting with aggression more generally. It brings to mind the old saying that the only safe borders for Russia are those with Russians on both sides. In Afghanistan the regime had declared itself as in the Soviet camp but was in danger of falling apart, prompting the invasion. It was not, as claimed at the time, largely about preparing a push for Middle Eastern oil fields. Switching back to Europe, Putin’s actions in Ukraine are about Ukraine and not about preparing a push against the Baltic states. This problem is aggravated because it suits Putin’s purpose to create an aura of military menace as a form of deterrence.

Yet, if we are thinking in policy terms, can we assume that he does not pose a wider threat? It is all well and good to say that Putin was actually acting defensively in Ukraine and does not have ambitions in the Baltics. It would be strategically stupid when he is already overstretched. But if we are going to be empathic with the Baltic states, it is quite hard to ignore the possibility that we might be wrong.

Thus, geopolitically, empathy has real utility for decision-makers – but it is not suitable as the only basis for policy-making, because there are so many actors to empathize with. We can understand why Estonians and Latvians would be concerned. In complex foreign policy settings there are a lot of actors and there are only so many that we can manage to understand at once. Choices must be made, which means discounting some peoples’ concerns.

Returning to Putin’s deficiency of empathy, there is an inherent problem in oligarchies, which can be very acute. The lack of checks and balances provided by open politics and a free press, means that the confirmation bias of the country’s leaders is confirmed on a daily basis. Democracy gives us hope of correction. What has been fascinating in recent times has been Putin’s belief that his success in manipulating Russia’s own processes can be replicated elsewhere, with support for Le Pen in France and, most dramatically, using hacked materials, for Trump in the United States. Putin may think that there is no risk in this. He takes the view that everything is deniable, whatever the evidence, and that in the end the

West has to deal with him. But we have now reached the stage where even if Russia was telling the truth it would not be believed and Western political leaders do not forget who has lined up with their opponents.

There is also a major problem of understanding popular movements, and what is driving them. Today, that's where a lot of political action is centred. If leaders do not empathize with and understand these movements, then they will mischaracterise them in ways that either exaggerate their inner goodness and appeal or else dismiss their concerns, and so demonize people with genuine grievances. That creates future perils. As was observed some time ago, if you tell someone he is a rat often enough, he will grow whiskers and bite you!