

Strategic Empathy as a Tool of Statecraft

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Introduction

*“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” –Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*¹*

Empathy isn't normally the first word that comes to mind when scholars write or talk about foreign policy, security, or grand strategy. In fact, if the word empathy was used in the same sentence as the phrases “foreign policy”, “security”, or “grand strategy”, one might be forgiven for assuming that the person using that word was either embarrassingly naïve or hopelessly radical. After all, empathy is a term that often carries with it emotionally warm or idealistic connotations that can also seem to include a desire to actively emotionally sympathize with or even aid whomever empathy is being practiced on. Such connotations and altruism do not readily make empathy a useful paradigm in foreign policy. It is well known that most foreign policy literature normally does not even consider empathy or else actively is hostile to the idea as being against the brutal realities of human nature or as dangerous to the national interest. Indeed, the only exceptions seem to be in the fields of international development, human rights and relief work, or conflict resolution and peace studies.

Yet despite all of this, if framed properly, empathy can be seen as a useful tool for serving the national interest in harmony with a realist grand strategy paradigm. This paper argues that a redefined, more strategic empathy, not only fills several holes in traditional international relations theory but is also essential to a fully-functioning grand strategy. To demonstrate this, empathy will be examined and defined as a means to better understand other actors with whom American foreign policy interacts with. Secondly, the theoretical implications of empathy, along with objections, will be considered. Third, this paper will use two case studies to demonstrate the

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, ed. James Clavell (New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group, 1983), 18.

usefulness of empathy; one focusing on America's opening to China under President Richard Nixon and the other on America's policy failures during the initial occupation of Iraq under President Bush. Finally, this paper will conclude with a few policy suggestions regarding both case studies and some empathetic shifts regarding overall U.S. grand strategy.

Empathy Defined

Before one can attempt to determine the relevance of empathy as a tool of statecraft, the term empathy itself must be defined. While at first glance this may appear to be unnecessary semantics, a literature review of several major works on empathy quickly reveal that there is actually much debate on the definition in the many academic fields.² Karla McLaren, an empathy educator and researcher, mentions that several difficulties include considering whether empathy includes a sympathetic emotional response, sincere attempts to help others, or just the attempt to understand where another person is coming from regardless of intent or depth.³ Indeed the questions of sympathy, altruism, and also their related connotations, appear throughout the literature. For instance, Oxfam and United Nations adviser Roman Krznaric has written that empathy is not the same thing as sympathy and, although it is altruistic, it often gets associated with vague, fluffy, upbeat feelings that distract from his view of empathy as an ideal that leads to positive actions.⁴ Finally, all of these issues are visited repeatedly by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, the editors of one of the most up-to-date compilations of philosophical and psychological research and views on empathy.

² Karla McLaren, *The Art of Empathy: A Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2014), 4.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (New York, NY: Perigee, 2014), ix.

Ms. Coplan and Mr. Goldie explain the origin of the concept by David Hume, who used the word sympathy to describe low-level emotional feelings, and Adam Smith, who recognized the importance of deliberately imagining oneself in another’s emotional situation and viewpoint.⁵ Evolving from the German word *Einfühlung*, the word empathy would not enter English until 1909 and would eventually evolve to include Adam Smith’s understanding of imagining oneself in another’s place as a clear mental and social tool for understanding others emotions and actions.⁶ Yet despite this understanding among most philosophers, the field of psychology continues to have a notable lack of consensus regarding the definition of empathy beyond that it is a means to understand another person’s emotional state and so allows a more appropriate response based off of that state instead of just one’s own.⁷

To demonstrate the difficulty in pinning down what exactly empathy is, several definitions and their different characteristics are listed below.

Definition of Empathy	Defining Characteristics
[Empathy is] “a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support.” ⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Skill • Emotional Skill • A Tool of Understanding • Altruistic • Sympathetic • Intentional and Sensitive
“[E]mpathy: imagining or simulating another’s experience and perspective, in order to better understand them. Empathy, in this sense, is rational and cognitive. Is a tool for understanding the way another person thinks, feels, or perceives. It enables us to comprehend another’s mindset, driving emotions or outlook, without requiring us to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imaginative • Rational and Cognitive • A Tool of Understanding • Not Sympathetic • Not Emotional • Intentional

⁵ Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, eds., *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), x–xi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xii–xix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁸ McLaren, *The Art of Empathy: A Complete Guide to Life’s Most Essential Skill*, 4.

share the other’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, or, indeed, approve of them.” ⁹	
“Empathy is, in fact, an ideal that has the power to both transform our lives and to bring about fundamental social change. Empathy can create a revolution... a revolution of human relationships... empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions. So empathy is distinct from expressions of sympathy- such as pity or feeling sorry for somebody- because these do not involve trying to understand the other persons’ emotions or point of view. Nor is empathy the same as the Golden Rule... since this assumes your interests coincide with theirs.” ¹⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An ideal • Revolutionary • Social in Nature • Imaginative • A Tool of Understanding • Not Sympathetic • Not the Golden Rule • Intentional
“[E]mpathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation.” ¹¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imaginative • A Tool of Understanding • Intentional • Observation with Distinction from Self

Although the definitions of empathy vary, for the sake of clarity and the purposes of this paper, I will be using a definition that encompasses some of the more commonly accepted aspects of empathy shown above. I will define *strategic empathy* as a *mental tool of understanding that gathers information on another actor with the sincere goal of completely understanding them and any situation through their eyes such that one can respond with perception in the advancement of the national interest*. It is important to note that this definition, by necessity when discussing foreign policy, focuses on the macro-level of state and non-state

⁹ Matt Waldman, “Strategic Empathy: The Afghanistan Intervention Shows Why The U.S. Must Empathize With Its Adversaries” (Washington, D.C., 2014), 2, [https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/4350-strategic-empathy-2/Waldman Strategic Empathy_2.3caa1c3d706143f1a8cae6a7d2ce70c7.pdf](https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/4350-strategic-empathy-2/Waldman%20Strategic%20Empathy_2.3caa1c3d706143f1a8cae6a7d2ce70c7.pdf).

¹⁰ Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It*, x.

¹¹ Amy Coplan, “Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects,” in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

actors. This definition could also be applied to foreign leaders and individual human actors, though that is not the focus of this paper. Also, I have chosen this definition for several reasons other than simply settling on a definition for this paper.

As mentioned, clarity was important since empathy can be seen as a vague and confusing term. Secondly, empathy is often confused with sympathy and so raises of objection of undermining national interests by opening up the door to adopt the views and emotions of a potential enemy. However, I have deliberately tailored this definition to not include sympathetic emotional rapport with the other group or a need to act in a way that furthers that other group's interests. I fully recognize the importance of concerns regarding emotional rapport or altruism. Those things can be helpful when utilizing soft power or assisting an ally, but they could also be actively harmful to the national interests that lie at the heart of any well-formulated foreign policy. It is one thing when the case in question is humanitarian or involving a comprehensive peace agreement, it is another entirely if sympathy is applied to genocidal actors such as to the Axis powers of World War II or to cotemporary jihadist groups such as ISIS. It is important to emphasize that using empathy to understand and, and thus better counter and defeat an opponent, is not the same thing as sympathy or agreeing with or condoning the actions of another actor.

Strategic Empathy as a Tool of Statecraft

The importance of empathy lies in that it serves as a paradigm through which policymakers and researchers can be reminded to seek out all relevant and useful information to fully understand other actors. Although such a thing might seem obvious, many countries' grand strategies, including that of the United States, often fall short. This is because strategic empathy includes three key parts: (1) information gathering, (2) a sincere attempt to understand through

the others' own eyes, and (3) to do all of this with an eye towards serving the national interest by utilizing those insights. Any of these three pieces taken alone would be insufficient as a component of grand strategy.

Many strategic errors occur because a country fails to intentionally learn anything about other countries or about their adversaries during wartime. Dr. Terry Diebel, a Professor at the National War College who wrote one of the standard textbooks on grand strategy, argues in *Foreign Affairs Strategy* that there are four standard tools in any grand strategy toolkit. These are diplomacy, information, the military, and economics.¹² Of these tools, information is the means by which not only are propaganda and psychological warfare waged, but that vital public data and clandestine intelligence obtained. The purpose of doing so is to have more information to work with when a given scenario arises.

Although it should be obvious to any good strategist that having as much useful data and effective propaganda as possible is an important step, this can at times be overlooked as happened with American policy before and during the war in Afghanistan. These included massive misunderstandings about local cultural and the strategic situation on the ground, including the continued problem posed by Pakistani havens for Taliban fighters.¹³ Another problem was that attempts to win hearts and minds were necessarily damaged by the lack of Pashto speakers, with only six speakers from the Foreign Service in the entire area.¹⁴ As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it in his memoir *Duty*, America's political leaders and forces were "profoundly ignorant about our adversaries and about the situation on the ground."¹⁵

¹² Terry L. Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 208–209.

¹³ Waldman, "Strategic Empathy: The Afghanistan Intervention Shows Why The U.S. Must Empathize With Its Adversaries," 2–5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 589.

An additionally related issue with a failure to gather information or to use it properly is that one of the major causes of wars is a heightened in-group and out-group mentality between two actors.¹⁶ Over time each group will be demonize the other actor as somehow less human, as evil, or as undeserving of consideration.¹⁷ Such marginalization of the other actor often causes hostile reactions that only reinforce negative stereotyping and the othering process that makes any negotiation more difficult. This often stems from a lack of empathy because one or both sides refuse to attempt to understand the other side or to see them as human. As the Chairman for Defence Studies at King's College London has written, "It is all too easy for a group to slide from recognizing that it is different from other groups to believing that it is superior to them. Hence, this sense of differentiation... readily leads to group selfishness, inter-group conflict, and ultimately war."¹⁸ Additionally, social psychological research has suggested that the capacity for rational thought or moral considerations are easily swept aside in group mentalities, such as hyper-nationalism, and so become more hostile and emotional in nature.¹⁹

The danger of marginalizing another actor or reducing them to a simplistic and hated caricature is something that strategists have and should take seriously. For instance, the U.S. Defense Department's *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication on Strategy (MCDP 1-1)* warns readers that "[An] adversary often refuses to fit our preconceptions of him or to stand still while we erect the apparatus for his destruction."²⁰ One of the examples provided in the manual is that of Nazi Germany during World War II. Had Hitler been less firm in his racism and ideological commitments, he should have been able to see that there were millions of neutral if not actively

¹⁶ John Garnett, "The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace," in *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies*, ed. John Baylis et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 81.

¹⁷ McLaren, *The Art of Empathy: A Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill*, 272–274.

¹⁸ Garnett, "The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace," 81.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ United States Department of the Navy, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication on Strategy (MCDP 1-1)* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 1997), 9.

friendly Ukrainians and Belorussians who could have fought on the German side or who would not have become pro-Soviet partisans.²¹ However, Germany invaded the Soviet Union they treated most Soviet citizens as belonging to the same Slavic ethnic groups that the Nazis viewed as inferior and thus unworthy of any consideration. Given the high degree of Stalin's repression of Ukrainians in particular, including millions of deaths from artificial famines, many Ukrainians readily hated the Soviet state and communist party but the invading Germans unleashed their own brand of oppression instead of coopting anti-Soviet dissidents for their own strategic ends. This repression turned the Nazis from potential liberators with millions more forces at their disposal to an even more hated enemy that the local populace was determined to harass and defeat.

As that example of marginalization and hatred demonstrates, gathering information is, in and of itself, insufficient. Statistical data, economic and military projections, demographic surveys, and the like are all useful. But gathering such intelligence is only a first step. Without a genuine and deliberate attempt to understand another actor through their own eyes, such information will lead to the wrong insight or no insight at all. As *MCDP 1-1* points out,

*“Judging the national character of an adversary (or ally) goes well beyond traditional orders of battle and related calculations regarding military and economic power. It requires consideration of national history, culture, religion, society, politics- everything that contributes to the makeup and functioning of a nation. The strategist must compile a complete dossier on a nation similar to that commonly prepared on enemy commanders.”*²²

In fact, such is the importance that the American military places on attempting to understand the enemy that it engages in simulated war and geopolitical games with other actors in what is known as “red-teaming.”²³ Similarly, intelligence organs such as the Central

²¹ Ibid., 72–73.

²² Ibid., 25.

²³ Waldman, “Strategic Empathy: The Afghanistan Intervention Shows Why The U.S. Must Empathize With Its Adversaries,” 6.

Intelligence Agency also engage in simulations of crises and geopolitical situations with their deliberately “outside-the-box” Red Cell unit tasked with undertaking some of those simulations and reports.²⁴ As the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, an institution of higher learning run by the U.S. military, explains in *The Applied Critical Thinking Handbook*, effective red-teaming requires “[d]eveloping better questions about culture, in order to facilitate strategic and operational decision making which [are] informed by cultural empathy.”²⁵ The Handbook goes on to push the importance of combining different fields of knowledge and views to gain a better understanding of the actor one is attempting to simulate. Thus already something akin to strategic empathy is already being practiced to a limited degree by the security institutions tasked with defending the United States and with helping to formulate and carry out its grand strategy.²⁶

Finally, the last point to be made is that strategic empathy is useful because, when combined with an eye towards both sides’ national interests, it can provide insights on another actor and how they might react if those interests were threatened. This is especially important because actors tend to react strongly when those interests are threatened, whether the threat is real or perceived.²⁷ In other words, while from country A’s perspective an action it takes may not be seen as threatening to country B, it might actually be a major issue for country B that could damage relations or result in an armed confrontation.

A contemporary instance of this is NATO’s expansion after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, and especially the 2008 commitment at the Bucharest

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ TRADOC G2 Operational Environment Enterprise, *The Applied Critical Thinking Handbook (Formerly the Red Team Handbook)*, 7.0 Jan 20 (Washington, D.C.: University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, 2015), 6, http://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/documents/ufmcs/The_Applied_Critical_Thinking_Handbook_v7.0.pdf.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

²⁷ Navy, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication on Strategy (MCDP 1-1)*, 38–39.

Summit to eventually include Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance.²⁸ In 1987 Secretary of State George Shultz told his Russian counterpart “[I will] never ask you to do something that I believe is not in your country’s interest”²⁹ and 1992 President Bush Sr. had warned Americans “not to gloat” over the Cold War victory.³⁰ Yet under President Clinton NATO expanded in 1999 to include Poland and under President Bush Jr. in 2004 NATO included the Baltic states, countries that had previously been a part of Soviet (and thus historically Russian) territory for a long time.³¹

For many in the U.S., NATO, and E.U. the expansion of NATO was simply a way of ensuring that those states would be assisted economically and integrated into a peaceful (and, of course, Western) geopolitical framework. But, from the point of view of Russia, which had been devastatingly invaded from the West no less than four times from 1708 to 1941,³² the expansion of a traditionally hostile military alliance closer to its capital and deep into its traditional borders was a gross violation of traditional Russian security interests.³³ There were those in the West who had spoken up against such expansion as unnecessary and provocative, most notably traditional realists such as George Kennan, who thought that such expansion would threaten Russia’s core interests and thus trigger a second Cold War.³⁴ Such a move they argued would not be in America’s core interests as it would worsen relations with another power and would

²⁸ NATO, “Bucharest Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008” (Bucharest, Romania, 2008), http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

²⁹ Jack Matlock, “Who Is the Bully? The U.S. Has Treated Russia Like a Loser Since the End of the Cold War,” *Washington Post*, March 14, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/who-is-the-bully-the-united-states-has-treated-russia-like-a-loser-since-the-cold-war/2014/03/14/b0868882-aa06-11e3-8599-ce7295b6851c_story.html.

³⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, *America and the World: Conversations on the Future of American Foreign Policy*, ed. David Ignatius (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008), 6–8.

³¹ Matlock, “Who Is the Bully? The U.S. Has Treated Russia Like a Loser Since the End of the Cold War.”

³² Navy, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication on Strategy (MCDP 1-1)*, 24.

³³ Matlock, “Who Is the Bully? The U.S. Has Treated Russia Like a Loser Since the End of the Cold War.”

³⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Now a Word From X,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html>.

degrade U.S. security by putting American forces on the line to defend far-flung territories that would be more of a burden than a plus to NATO.

The history of how and why NATO expansion occurred, and whether that expansion broke any formal or informal promises not to do so on the part of Washington and the Western European capitals is the subject of much debate.³⁵ Aside from those firmly on either side, were a few who tried to take a middle ground such as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In a 1994 *Washington Post* article, Kissinger advocated expanding NATO to fill the power vacuum before Russia and Germany competed over it, but he also argued not to station any troops in the new territories to avoid provoking Russia.³⁶ Ultimately, the American and European heads of state ignored any warnings about NATO expansion and still plan on adding Ukraine and Georgia to the alliance. Perhaps had the U.S. and its allies realized how the Russians would have viewed and reacted to such expansion, and, more importantly, considered the potential clash such a reaction would have to American core security interests, they might have held off and the current Ukrainian crisis and poor relations with Russia might not have occurred or been as fraught.

A decision to not have expanded NATO as quickly or to have approached relations with some of the former Soviet states differently would have been a prudent one in light of U.S. interests and to desire to avoid unnecessary additional threats to the physical security of American forces and its allies. Additionally now there is the danger that should Russian pressure cause a permanent halt in Ukrainian and Georgian accession to NATO, Moscow will learn that such aggression works and Washington will lose credibility if it and the alliance fails to follow

³⁵ Uwe Klubbman, Matthias Schepp, and Klaus Wiegrefe, "Did the West Break Its Promise to Moscow?," *Spiegel Online*, November 26, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/nato-s-eastward-expansion-did-the-west-break-its-promise-to-moscow-a-663315.html>.

³⁶ Henry Kissinger, "Expand NATO Now," *The Washington Post*, December 19, 1994, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1994/12/19/expand-nato-now/f1f0b4ed-56ee-4e5b-84ba-ae19a07a9997/?utm_term=.bc95355fbc26.

through on a public and serious commitment to new NATO membership. America is caught in a difficult situation in which it can either honor a commitment to expand the alliance to states actively under attack from hybrid warfare from Russia or it could decide to wait on further action indefinitely. To push membership now could increase Russian pressure or result in NATO having to fight a nuclear-armed Russia over breakaway territories in Ukraine or Georgia. To wait on membership would be to lose face and embolden Russia to put more of Ukraine or Georgia under its thumb or to further test the waters of provocation against weaker alliance members like the Baltic states. Ultimately America needs to better understand not only when its policies conflict with the core interests of other states, but also when it is worth pursuing such policies regardless of such conflict. U.S. officials should only make commitments that enhance core national interests and that America is fully willing to deliver on and should know better than to do otherwise.

International Relations Theory and Empathy

In order to see how strategic empathy fits, or doesn't fit, into existing international relations theory, the two main theories, realism and liberalism, will be examined. Realism is an international relations theory that views the international system as anarchical in which states are the primary actors, which compete for power and security. Related theories include classical realism, which considers human nature to be the primary cause of conflict, and neorealism/structural realism, which places the emphasis on the anarchical nature of the system as the cause of conflict.

The value of both of these forms of realism is that they correctly assert the mostly anarchical nature of the world and the problems of security and competition for power among

states. Additionally in many cases realism also properly predicts how great powers will react to each other, especially when one great power involves itself in another great power's traditional or preferred sphere of influence and regional hegemony. For instance, during the Cuban Missile Crisis the United States reacted very strongly to the threat posed by the presence of a rival great power's military base armed with nuclear missiles. Such a base was located very close to the American homeland and was situated in an area traditionally dominated by a forceful U.S. military presence. After all, one can easily recall the vigor with which America initially proclaimed, and then later built the capacity to enforce, the Monroe Doctrine against interference in the Western hemisphere by foreign powers. Similarly, such a theory of great power competition and balance can also be seen playing out now with Russia's forceful military reaction to keep Ukraine in its traditional sphere of influence and hegemony. American, NATO, and E.U. involvement in Ukraine, especially after the addition of Poland and the Baltics to NATO and the E.U., was seen in Moscow as a threat to traditional Russian security interests in a similar manner to how Washington had viewed the Soviet presence in Cuba.

This realist view of how great powers act poses a challenge to the idea that strategic empathy could be a useful tool of statecraft. The challenge is that if realist theory can predict such behavior by great powers vis-à-vis other great powers, then how does strategic empathy add anything new if both could have predicted the American reaction to Cuba or the Russian reaction to Ukraine? They both might arrive at their conclusions by different routes, but they arrive at the same conclusions nonetheless, at least in these two examples. Yet the difference in how they arrived at those conclusions does matter and can, in fact, lead to very different conclusions.

Although views differ from each realist school and realist scholar, traditional realism has viewed states as black boxes whose internal workings, history, and culture aren't always or even

often necessary factors to consider when considering great power relations. In other words, realism appears to posit that knowing that the world is anarchical and that states are competitive over power and security is enough to prescribe how most great powers will react in most cases. Yet to ignore the complex inner-workings of an actor and to disregard their history, culture, and particular circumstances and the like would be a mistake. It would also be a mistake to assume that all states or organizations are governed by fully rational individuals whose sole purpose is to maximize power and to mitigate anarchy. As *MCDP 1-1* explains,

“The attempt to apply a scientific approach [to grand strategy] can result in some misleading ideas. For example, some political scientists treat political entities as unitary rational actors, the social equivalents of Newton’s solid bodies hurtling through space. Real political units, however, are not unitary. Rather, they are collections of intertwined but fundamentally distinct actors and systems. Their behavior derives from the internal interplay of both rational and irrational forces as well as from the peculiarities of their own histories and of chance. Strategists who accept the unitary rational actor model as a description of adversaries at war will have difficulty understanding either side’s motivations or actual behavior. Such strategists ignore their own side’s greatest potential vulnerabilities and deny themselves potential levers and targets- the fault lines that exist within any human political construct.”³⁷

Thus ignoring the complexity of actors and their many characteristics could lead a policymaker to misread a given situation or to miss out on key facts. As mentioned, both realist theory and strategic empathy would have warned against NATO expansion into former Soviet bloc territory, especially former Soviet territory such as the Baltics. But in the 1990s and early 2000s while Russia reacted with strong diplomatic statements, Moscow brought no military or economic pressure was brought to bear until the mid-2000s, most notably with the 2008 invasion of Georgia. Additionally various attempts at rapprochement were made and failed, at least in part because America continued to advance NATO and insist it wasn’t a threat, whereas a weakened Russia questioned the existence and expansion of a Cold War-era security alliance whose originally purpose was to counter Moscow when it no longer had its own alliance- the Warsaw

³⁷ Navy, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication on Strategy (MCDP 1-1)*, 16–17.

Pact.³⁸ Many American diplomats, politicians, and academics either ignored Russian protests during the 1990s or assumed they weren't a big deal since the realist prediction of a forceful reaction had yet to occur and seemed unlikely to.³⁹ A purely realist theoretical approach failed to account for the weakness of a post-Soviet Russia and of the important succession of a more assertive President Vladimir Putin in place of a more cautious President Boris Yeltsin. A pure realist approach also failed to account for why America was willing to engage in policies that were so clearly a violation of the wisdom that realism teaches on great power relations, whereas a lack of empathy helps to explain such a violation.

The arrogance and lack of knowledge of Russian history or opinion on the part of American leaders was detrimental to U.S. interest. Many American officials believed Russia to be irrelevant and this was reflected when Washington reacted with shock to what should have been seen as an increasingly likely Russian military intervention in Crimea and Ukraine.⁴⁰ For instance, American lack of empathy for and understanding of Russia was explored in *Foreign Policy* article wrote by former Ambassador to Russia James Collins and former Deputy Director of the Carnegie Endowment's Russia and Eurasia Program Matthew Rojansky. Their co-authored piece, entitled "Why Russia Matters: Ten Reasons Why Washington Must Engage Moscow," sought to counter the tendency of U.S. officials to disregard Russian views and interests along with their impact on American policy.⁴¹ In retrospect it would seem embarrassing that Washington officials, politicians, and academics had to be reminded of the importance of a

³⁸ Matlock, "Who Is the Bully? The U.S. Has Treated Russia Like a Loser Since the End of the Cold War."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Henry Kissinger, "Henry Kissinger: To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End," *Washington Post*, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html.

⁴¹ James Collins and Matthew Rojansky, "Why Russia Matters: Ten Reasons Why Washington Must Engage Moscow," *Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C., August 2010), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/08/18/why-russia-matters/>.

large, nuclear-armed, and traditional great power whose borders our alliance had grown closer to and whose interests we had ignored.

One more example helps to illustrate the usefulness of empathy to fill a gap in realism. This is the contradiction in realist theory that assumes that all great powers are necessarily in conflict over security and power. The world remains anarchical and yet certain powerful countries with large economies and armed with nuclear weapons, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, maintain friendly relations. Without delving into the empathetic linkages of shared culture, language, history, civilization, and identity it would be difficult to explain beyond the possibility of bandwagoning why America and the U.K. have maintained good relations for so long and are not, nor likely to become, bitter rivals.⁴²

There is still one other point to be made in regard to realist theory. This is the classically realist argument that conflict is ultimately rooted in human nature, not the structure of the international system (which is seen as just a consequence of said human nature), and therefore empathy is impossible or pointless. Such a view usually tends to take to heart the phrase philosopher Thomas Hobbes used in *Leviathan* to describe the dangerous and anarchical state of nature humanity exists in as “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁴³ If all conflict is rooted in a fixed evil or aggressive human nature, such a truth would render any discussion of empathy, or conflict in general, as moot since humanity would be doomed to always engage in conflict and no remedy would exist.⁴⁴

⁴² Joseph S. Nye Jr. and David A. Welch, *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: An Introduction to Theory and History*, Eighth (Boston: Longman, 2011), 8.

⁴³ Thomas Hobbes and Richard Tuck, *Hobbes: Leviathan: Revised Student Edition*, ed. Richard Tuck, Revised (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 90.

⁴⁴ Christopher Mitchell, *The Nature of Intractable Conflict: Resolution in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 1.

Although I admit I am strongly partial to such a negative view of human nature, it should be noted that reality is somewhat less clear cut. Even with advances in philosophy, psychology, neurology, sociology, primatology, and similar fields, one can readily summon several experiments to prove any conception of human nature they prefer, whether negative, positive, or benign.⁴⁵ As Emeritus Professor at George Mason University's School of Conflict Analysis Resolution Christopher Mitchell summarizes in his compressive literature on human nature, "The fact is that much behavior of humans... varies, depending on context and environment... The key question about how flexible 'human nature' might prove to be in various situations and environments thus remains a matter for careful investigation."⁴⁶ Therefore, because academia is divided over human nature, I would suggest that instead of framing human nature in any particular light, such as how a Hobbesian realist might, it ought to instead be viewed as imperfect or flawed. Given the problems that exist in the world today as a result humanity's capacity to make foolish or harmful decisions it would hardly seem a stretch to suggest that humanity is imperfect. Additionally, for the sake of staying on the topic of discussing human nature and international relations as they exist today, it would seem prudent to set aside arguments regarding how fixed or adjustable human nature or its imperfection are. If we accepting the idea of human nature as flawed, and assuming that we as individuals and as collective groups have free will, the dilemma of a Hobbesian objection to strategic empathy as a tool of grand strategy appears to be solved.

This is done by acknowledging that imperfect humans are likely to make imperfect decisions that can result in Hobbesian outcomes including war, but that because we have choices to make we can also choose (up to a certain extent based on our nature) to instead engage in

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1–21.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 21–22.

empathetic attempts at understanding others. Professor John Stoessinger, a former Director of the Political Affairs Division at the United Nations, wrote a book entitled *Why Nations go to War* in which he reviewed case studies of major conflicts. He concluded that in addition to the personalities of leaders, misperception was one of the most vital factors in causing wars.⁴⁷

In other words, it was a failure to understand the other side and the strategic situation which led to, often ruinous, war. In his chapter on the outbreak of World War I, he summarized saying, “Mortals made these decisions. They made them in fear and in trembling, but they made them nonetheless. In most cases, the decision makers were not evil people bent on destruction but were frightened and entrapped by self-delusion. They based their policies on fears, not facts, and were singularly devoid of empathy.”⁴⁸ Thus it ought to be clear that while realism as a theory is highly useful, neither a classical version based on human nature nor a neorealist version based on structuralism are always sufficient to understand other actors or to formulate grand strategies that are accurate and in the national interest.

This paper discussed the objections raised by realism extensively because most resistance to the use of empathy seems to come from paradigms that put the strongest emphasis on hard power over soft power or anything that might appear to approximate strategic empathy.⁴⁹

Although there are realists, such as Kissinger, and liberals, such as Stoessinger, both of whom are well versed in attempting to understand other actors, such instances are the exception rather than the rule, especially when the unbending ideologies of neoconservatism or right-to-protect are involved. Additionally, certain difficulties also arise from the traditional international relations theory of liberalism as it too can fall short due to a lack of strategic empathy.

⁴⁷ John G. Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go to War*, 10th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 392.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁹ Waldman, “Strategic Empathy: The Afghanistan Intervention Shows Why The U.S. Must Empathize With Its Adversaries,” 6–7.

Liberalism can be defined as a theory that views international relations as a less-than-Hobbesian (but still somewhat anarchical) system in which states and nonstate actors compete and cooperate to advance their self-interests and well-being through mechanisms such as trade and formal institutions. Although at times naïve, liberalism is incredibly useful as a more complex model that recognizes the importance of soft power, including economic, cultural, and institutional linkages among actors. For instance, realism would not have been able to predict or advise that the United States undertake the Marshall Plan after World War II. After all, what state would want to spend money and effort rebuilding former great powers that had dragged that state twice into destructive world wars? Yet the Marshall Plan was a success and has been credited as playing a pivotal role in helping unite Western Europe as a political bloc that would eventually emerge into the European Union and that would align itself with American geopolitical interests through NATO.^{50 51} One of the keys that allowed this was that the U.S. had learned from the mistakes of the peace settlement of World War I and knew that it would be better to rebuild, rehabilitate, and reintegrate Germany and Japan into a new institutionalized world order than to undertake further punitive measures that might only cause resentment and yet another war.⁵²

However, like realism, liberalism is also insufficient to fully understand and tailor strategies towards certain actors. While liberalism ought to be applauded for its understanding of soft power, such power may be useful but it is not necessarily empathetic. One could be a member of institutions designed to improve international relations but their utility depends on

⁵⁰James Sheehan, *Where Have All The Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe* (Boston, MA: First Mariner Books, 2008), 150–162.

⁵¹ John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 163–180.

⁵² Ibid.

how each member state decides to use its influence there. A state could ignore the opportunity such a platform provides, could fail to build alliances, or not use such a regional institution to bolster its cultural, military, or economic power vis-à-vis other rival states.

Finally, one other point must be made regarding liberalism. Soft power has become widely recognized as an important tool with which to increase interdependency through trade and with which to spread one's culture and charm other societies into liking yours. But like creating or participating in global trade or institutions, pushing soft power all by itself doesn't mean that one will necessarily glean insights into how another actor thinks and why. Trade certainly creates mutual goodwill by lifting the livelihoods of both sides that exchange goods. But trade or economic arrangements can also cause conflict if other actor's concerns or interests are not heeded, such as in the case of poor economic management of the Eurozone and the debt crises in Europe which currently threaten the survival of the E.U. and which influenced the U.K. vote to leave it. Likewise international institutions are useful to conduct diplomacy, exchange vital information, and to have a formal forum to push national interests. But as shown not all nations or their representatives know how to use these institutions fully to their advantage or how to charm and negotiate with others. Although the soft power to persuade or seduce other actors is useful, it could fail to work if no proper attempt to understand other societies, and then to care about that understanding, is undertaken.

For example, while international meetings are a commonly accepted means to push negotiation and soft power, in wake of the Ukraine crisis Russia's World War II allies refused to attend the 2015 Victory Day Celebration and Parade.⁵³ This was a major insult to Russia considering that they bore most of the fighting during the war, something that most Americans

⁵³ Carol Williams, "Raining on Putin's Parade: Why So Many No-Shows for WWII Celebration?," *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-snubbed-parade-20150508-story.html>.

still fail to realize.⁵⁴ During the Second World War, the Soviet Union had under arms 20 million men compared to the Western Allies' 3.5 million after D-Day and Russia would go on to lose 11 million soldiers and 20 million civilians with a ratio of eighty Russian soldiers dead per one German they killed.⁵⁵ When one also considers that American leaders and other allies had routinely attended such celebrations even during the difficult days of the Cold War to pay their respects to the Russians' sacrifice, their absence only caused anger and insult when visiting could have at least kept tensions the same if not ease them slightly.⁵⁶

In this particular case, Western leaders either failed to understand just how much of a slight this would be or, just as likely, failed to care about the impact on a revisionist Russia still attempting to recover its great power status, respect, and some semblance of its traditional sphere of influence since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Doubtlessly many who failed to attend knew the symbolic importance of their attendance and decided to not attend out of a calculation that it would show their displeasure over Russia's annexation of Crimea. They also may have thought that had they attended, their attendance might be interpreted as a weak response or even tacit acceptance of the annexation as a *fait accompli*. Either way, the officials who didn't attend calculated that it was worth the cost.

Yet as explained, the tremendous cost of Russian forces and people during World War II is something that strikes at the heart of Russian pride and identity. This difference in national historiographies created more meaning and importance for Russia than the mere attendance or lack of attendance of Western officials to any other memorial ceremony could. To not attend was not seen as a statement on Crimea and Ukraine but on Russian sacrifices during World War II

⁵⁴ J.T. Dykman, "WWII Soviet Experience," *The Eisenhower Institute*, 2016, http://www.eisenhowerinstitute.org/about/living_history/wwii_soviet_experience.dot.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Williams, "Raining on Putin's Parade: Why So Many No-Shows for WWII Celebration?"

and was seen as insulting and belittling to all those Russian lives. Russian textbooks refer to World War II as the “Great Patriotic War” and argue that it took the Americans seemingly suspiciously forever, perhaps purposefully, to open a Western front.⁵⁷ In contrast, many Americans grow up learning a version of history that tends to portray World War II as yet another instance of America bravely and heroically more-than-not by itself saving the world again from tyranny as it did in World War I. The cost to the Russians isn’t as widely known or understood. Add to this the fall from superpower status following the fall of the Soviet Union and the often condescending attitude of U.S. and Western officials. The West not only gloated that it had won the Cold War, but it also repeatedly lectured Russia on how to behave in its immediate traditional sphere of regional influence as if it was a particularly troublesome student in the back of class. Regardless of the morality or legality of Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine, failure to attend the Victory Day celebrations only added fuel to an already raging fire of resurgence and damaged national pride deep in the heart of Russia policy towards those and other former Soviet territories. These examples serve to show the limits of mainstream international relations theories when attempting to fully understand, and account for, the views of other actors when forming policy and defending the national interests.

The Opening of China

As mentioned, strategic empathy includes three key parts: (1) information gathering, (2) a sincere attempt to understand through the others’ own eyes, and (3) to do all of this with an eye towards serving the national interest by utilizing those insights. A case study of President

⁵⁷ Dykman, “WWII Soviet Experience.”

Nixon's successful normalization of relations with China over the course of several efforts from 1971 to 1972 is one example of the concept of strategic empathy in action.

When Nixon ran for President he looked at the international scene and recognized that fraught relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), including tensions over North Korea and Taiwan, represented a continuing threat of regional instability or even of war. Such a threat distracted from America's ability to focus on other hotspots around the globe and would be even more problematic if China ever became more powerful and remained an ally of the Soviet Union as it did. Basic realist grand strategy declares that there are four main national interests: "Physical Security, Economic Prosperity, Value Preservation at Home, and Value Projection Overseas."⁵⁸ Nixon saw that the danger of armed conflict or proxy wars in East Asia and the difficulty of winding up the war in Vietnam were directly related to the temperature of US-PRC relations.⁵⁹ Such threats directly impacted the first two core national interests: safeguarding the physical security of the state and its allies, and maintaining economic prosperity through international trade. If relations with China could be improved without too high of a cost, the danger to these two core national interests would at least drastically shrink if not disappear and the Soviet Union would lose a traditional ally in an upcoming and vital region of the globe. Fixated on the national interest to begin with, Nixon started off correctly by surveying the global situation, looking for ways to reduce the threats to American core interests in Asia while also attempting to further contain the Soviet Union.

Shortly after becoming President, Nixon ordered his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to advise the State Department, the Defense Department, and the Central Intelligence

⁵⁸ Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft*, 126–134.

⁵⁹ David Ignatius, "Nixon's Great Decision On China, 40 Years Later," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/nixons-great-decision-on-china-40-years-later/2012/02/10/gIQAtFh34Q_story.html?utm_term=.8a80b3e15f1e.

Agency to conduct a new comprehensive study of US-PRC relations, PRC intentions, and the merits and risks of different methods to reduce tensions.⁶⁰ In addition to this study, President Nixon sent out many low-key feelers and probes on possibilities of American-PRC rapprochement through back-channels.⁶¹ These included the US Ambassador to Poland, the President of Pakistan, the Ambassador and President of Romania, American journalist Edgar Snow, the PRC Ambassador to France, and Henry Kissinger himself. Additionally, the study Kissinger directed aimed to account for the concerns of allies such as Taiwan, and President Chiang Kai-shek of Taiwan was consulted himself.⁶² All of this activity to gain a better understanding of the situation, the possibilities that existed, and the possible reactions, fit the first part of strategic empathy: gather good information on the other actor one intends to deal with. Gathering this information leads directly into the second part- attempting to genuinely understand the other side through their eyes.

While still a candidate in 1967, Nixon wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that America “cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates, and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation.”⁶³ This quote is remarkable because it demonstrates several aspects of strategic empathy. Nixon managed to understand both the importance of the world’s most populous nation both in 1967 and as a future economic powerhouse. He also demonstrated that he could grasp how things might look from the view of Beijing. He understood that to keep China backed into a corner and hostile might not be the

⁶⁰ Henry Kissinger, “National Security Study Memorandum 14” (Washington, D.C., 1969), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d4>.

⁶¹ University of Southern California, “Getting To Beijing: Henry Kissinger’s Secret 1971 Trip,” *USC US-China Institute*, 2011, <http://china.usc.edu/getting-beijing-henry-kissingers-secret-1971-trip>.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Richard Nixon, “Asia After Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs*, no. October (1967), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1967-10-01/asia-after-viet-nam>.

wisest move as it would only add to China's grievances and give them future reason to act aggressively, especially if China ever gained the power to do so.

Since its inception the PRC was plagued by external and internal conflict and by the 1960s and 1970s felt surrounded and had its national interests in physical safety and economic stability continually threatened. Mao Zedong had fought the Korean War, engaged in the failed attempt at economic central planning known as the Great Leap Forward, and then had conducted deadly purges in the Cultural Revolution to maintain his control of the party and state. The Korean War cost several hundred thousand soldiers and the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution caused artificial famines and massive purges estimated to have combined killed upwards of 45 million. In addition to all of this was the real possibility of war with its former ally, the Soviet Union.

One fact unknown or forgotten to most Americans today was that in 1969 the Soviet Union seriously contemplated a nuclear attack on the PRC.⁶⁴ Both the Soviet Union and China had many disputes leading up to 1969, including ideological rivalries, border clashes, and distrust over their intentions. Both sides had huge pro-war demonstrations and had mobilized their militaries and nuclear forces. Mao had ordered his forces to scatter, for citizens to build bunkers, and transferred the governmental archives out of Beijing.⁶⁵ One of the major reasons that Moscow backed down from its plan to attack was that Nixon and Kissinger had threatened to retaliate in China's defense by firing nuclear missiles at 130 Soviet cities.⁶⁶ Thus not only did Nixon save the world from a regional nuclear war, but he had also understood that China was in dire straits and had begun to see the USSR as much more threatening to its national interests and

⁶⁴ Mark O'Neill, "Nixon Intervention Saved China From Soviet Nuclear Attack," *South China Morning Post*, May 12, 2010, <http://www.scmp.com/article/714064/nixon-intervention-saved-china-soviet-nuclear-attack>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

survival than the US. Indeed, this was confirmed when the Chinese had relayed as much to Nixon and Kissinger via Pakistani back channels, making it clear that they too found US-PRC rapprochement to be in their interests.⁶⁷

Nixon was able to both gather information on the positions and interests of the PRC and then understand their view and use that as the basis for negotiating a thaw in US-Chinese relations when before such a thing would have seemed impossible or as pandering to hostile communists. Indeed for a long time, American policy had been actively hostile to the PRC and had viewed them as another communist threat under the whims of Moscow. For instance, when the communists won the Chinese civil war the first question many in the US asked was who was responsible for the loss of China to the communists?⁶⁸ Yet Nixon saw that China was its own separate state with its own interests and issues and that those happened to coincide with American ones more than not, especially in regards to the threat posed by Moscow. He made public statements indicating a desire to improve relations and he began to ease economic and travel restrictions, including allowing the U.S. ping pong team to visit the PRC.⁶⁹ He was then able to negotiate a meeting between Kissinger and Zhou En-lai, a meeting which paved the way for the first trip any American president had made to Beijing and which would result in improved relations.⁷⁰

It could be argued that had Nixon or other American leaders before him applied realism, they would have arrived at the same conclusion- that rapprochement with China made sense.

Nixon would have realized that, of course, China was its own distinct state with its own interests

⁶⁷ Lindsey Grant and Hal Saunders, "Memorandum From Lindsey Grant and Hal Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)" (Washington, D.C., 1969), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d26>.

⁶⁸ Nishant Dahiya, "Answering the Old Question: Who Lost China?," *National Public Radio*, November 8, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2014/11/08/362342377/answering-the-old-question-who-lost-china>.

⁶⁹ University of Southern California, "Getting To Beijing: Henry Kissinger's Secret 1971 Trip."s

⁷⁰ Ibid.

separate and at odds with that of the Soviet Union. Two large powers in close proximity often do not get along and this was evidenced in the many fractures within USSR-PRC relations, from ideological disputes to border clashes. However, the problem with this is that assumptions and cognitive biases tended to override the ability to see the situation in a realist or empathetic light.

For instance, although many American policymakers correctly understood the realist nature of a struggle between the US and the USSR as great powers, they saw communist states as part of a monolithic threat controlled by Moscow. That, or they saw China as opaque and too untrustworthy to attempt a *détente* with given the past conflicts between Washington and Beijing. It was easy to conceptualize America and the Soviet Union as different and obviously competing states with clashing national interests, but it was difficult see the USSR and the PRC in the same light. After all, as mentioned before, it is possible for great powers to be allies such as the United Kingdom and the US or France and Germany. Although difficult, if states share a similar ideological framework, or are linked though trade and regional institutions such as NATO or the European Union, then they are less likely to be in conflict.

Looking from the outside in during the context of the Cold War it may be easier to forgive those at the time for thinking China, at least up until the mid-1960s, was necessarily a part of a singular communist threat. It should be remembered that the USSR had provided China with support during the Korean War, that both states shared a communist ideology and system, and that they both had signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance in 1950.⁷¹ Nixon was able to break out of the China-as-Moscow-puppet paradigm both because he was a realist and by gathering information to ascertain and confirm the viewpoint from Beijing and then use that insight to complete the Sino-Soviet rift to America's

⁷¹ Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 30–35.

benefit. He made the case that it would be unwise to keep the Chinese people in isolation and that the benefits of détente to both the PRC and the US were greater than maintaining past hostilities.

American Policy in the Iraq War

The Iraq War, waged from 2003 to 2011, is one that is widely recognized as a conflict that the United States lost and which ended up costing 4,491 lives⁷², over \$1 trillion,⁷³ and the attention and resources of an often-overstretched superpower. The conflict was framed primarily in terms of an immediate threat to the first core interest of physical security. It was also framed, to a lesser extent, as a threat to regional stability and the global oil supply, thus making Saddam a danger to America's second core interest of economic prosperity. Yet the war would prove detrimental to both of those interests. This case study will focus on the initial failures of American policy during the occupation of Iraq following the US-led invasion. This is done to highlight the lack of strategic empathy that was common throughout the Iraq War and the cost it had to American core interests. On all three steps, collecting accurate information, attempting to understand the other's point of view, and using those insights to advance the national interest, Washington often got it wrong.

America and its allies already had a great degree of, in hindsight flawed, intelligence on Saddam Hussein and whether or not he possessed nuclear weapons. That intelligence was used to convince Congress and the American people to go to war with the purpose of eliminating

⁷² Mark Thompson, "How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS," *Time Magazine* (New York, NY, May 2015), <http://time.com/3900753/isis-iraq-syria-army-united-states-military/>.

⁷³ Stephen Walt, "Top 10 Lessons of the Iraq War," *Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C., March 2012), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/20/top-10-lessons-of-the-iraq-war-2/>.

Saddam Hussein's regime and capacity to attack the US or its allies. The biggest flaw was, of course, that Washington and every other intelligence agency had been wrong about the existence of weapons of mass destruction. But there were also other errors that damaged America's ability to achieve a favorable situation in Iraq after successfully taking over the country. For instance, some policymakers and advisers thought that Iraq was not necessarily too different from a Germany or Japan after they were defeated in World War II and rebuilt into pro-US democracies by Allied occupation forces. The argument was made that, despite a long history to the contrary, Iraq had a sufficiently sized and powerful middle class and sufficiently minimal sectarian divides that it could readily accept a democratic system of government with parties based on ideologies, not religion or ethnic group.⁷⁴ This was not only false but also ignored the reality that Iraq had no prior experience with an actual functioning democracy and that it, like so many other former European colonies, had its borders drawn arbitrarily and without consideration for differing ethnic and religious groups.

Additionally, many US officials did not attempt to understand the point of view of either the Iraqis whom they intended to help and win over nor did they attempt to understand the views of the many insurgent groups that emerged quickly after the invasion. Finally many of the attempts that were made often fell short of being successful in comprehending the others' points of view. One of the better known examples of the inability to step into another's shoes was the decision to disband the Iraqi Army, a decision made shortly after the Iraqi surrender and which put between 200,000 and 400,000 Iraqi soldiers out of work.⁷⁵ Although any soldier below the

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Jane Arraf, "U.S. Dissolves Iraqi Army, Defense and Information Ministries," *CNN*, May 23, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/05/23/sprj.nitop.army.dissolve/.s>

rank of colonel could reenlist with the new Iraqi Army, soldiers were not automatically recalled.⁷⁶

This effectively resulted in hundreds of thousands of ex-soldiers without a source of income, still armed with their old weapons, and now with a grievance to harbor against American forces.⁷⁷ A large number of those Iraqis could have been accounted for and screened while also being used as indigenous peace keepers who knew the lay of the land and the local customs. Instead they were cut off. In addition, those officers of the rank of colonel or higher were not only barred from reenlisting if they wanted but would not get any severance payment, meaning that skilled military leaders were also suddenly given a grievance against the new order.⁷⁸ The result of all of this was that many of those soldiers and their commanders joined the many new insurgent groups that popped up in the immediate months after the disbandment of the Iraqi Army.⁷⁹ Today, it is widely known that many of those ex-soldiers and officers now comprise a large percent of the forces of the Islamic State (ISIS) and are responsible for its stunning military successes and the new headaches this has caused for American interests in the region.⁸⁰

Historians and the many officials involved have argued over who was ultimately responsible for this order and the chaos it caused. Some blamed the head civilian authority in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III, others President Bush, and finally other Vice President Dick Cheney.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ James Pfiffner, "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army," *Intelligence and National Security* 25, no. 1 (2010): 76–77, [http://pfiffner.gmu.edu/files/pdfs/Articles/CPA Orders, Iraq PDF.pdf](http://pfiffner.gmu.edu/files/pdfs/Articles/CPA%20Orders,%20Iraq%20PDF.pdf).

⁷⁸ Arraf, "U.S. Dissolves Iraqi Army, Defense and Information Ministries."

⁷⁹ Pfiffner, "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army," 76–77.

⁸⁰ Liz Sly, "The Hidden Hand Behind the Islamic State Militants? Saddam Hussein's," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html.

⁸¹ Michael Gordon, "Fateful Choice On Iraq Army Bypassed Debate," *New York Times*, March 17, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/17/world/middleeast/17bremer.html>.

Regardless of who exactly was responsible for coming up with the idea to disband the Iraqi army, or how transparent the attempt to get that policy approved was, the more important fact was that that decision was made and that it did not account for the views and interests of the Iraqi Army and how those could be coopted to serve US interests. The decision to eliminate the old Iraqi Army as a symbolic clean slate from Saddam's regime created more enemies than allies and made it harder to maintain peace, security, and the governance needed for economic recovery.⁸²

Dr. Ahmed Hashim of the US Naval War College served as a military adviser during the war and was one of the many consultants responsible for trying to understand why the insurgency began and how to counter it. He believes that the lack of cultural understanding on the part of Coalition forces heightened the conditions under which insurgencies occur and are sustained.⁸³ The leadership in Washington and on the ground simply did not understand what motivated the different insurgent and terrorist groups, how those actors related to each other and the many groups in Iraqi society, and how that information could be used to America's advantage.⁸⁴ Instead of seeing the many complex and different groups, the US administration tended to view and paint them all with the same pro-Saddam brush. Like the officials in the Cold War who regarded all communists to be cut from the same cloth and taking orders from one source, so too did officials during the Iraq War believe most insurgents to be the same. In an interview in November 2003, Hashim explained that

"[Insurgent groups included] regime loyalists, nationalists, and Islamist forces - all with their own motivations, levels of organization, and skills. Some fight to regain lost power, others for revenge. Some Iraqis heed the radical call of jihad, as do small groups of fighters flowing in from Syria and Lebanon. Others voice a visceral objection to foreign occupation

⁸² Pfiffner, "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army," 76–77.

⁸³ Steve Inskeep, "U.S.'s Cultural Ignorance Fuels Iraq Insurgency," *National Public Radio*, April 28, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5366677>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

*familiar to Arabs and evidenced by the history of wars in Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq.*⁸⁵

Case studies of successful counter insurgency efforts throughout history demonstrate that one of the factors are local language skills, civilian and military cooperation, political and economic development, and the in-community hosting and protection of local by police and military forces.⁸⁶ These were things that the US failed to do properly and sometimes not even at all. Overzealous attempts to eliminate remnants of the old regime also caused between 85,000 and 100,000 civilians to lose and be barred from their public jobs just for having both been members of Saddam Hussein's political party and for having been high ranking.⁸⁷ The fact that those civilians had to be members of the Baath Party to have their jobs under Saddam's brutal dictatorship didn't seem to have crossed policymakers' minds.⁸⁸ The result was the loss of vital local civilians who could have been pro-US supporters and who had vital technical know-how as administrators of schools, hospitals, power plants, and other public services.⁸⁹

Another key example returns to the case of Bremer, the civilian administrator who announced the disbandment of the Iraqi Army. Bremer was an appointee who had no prior experience in Iraq or the military and had been sent by President Bush to replace the former administrator, Jay Garner, who had been both a military officer in the first Gulf War.⁹⁰ Compounding the selection of leaders with a lack of experience and cultural knowledge was the denial of authority or acknowledgement of advice from those that did. One case of this was the fact that Bremer was supposed to be a co-administrator with Alamay Kahilzad, a U.S. citizen and

⁸⁵ Ann Tyson, "History's Lessons Call For Stamina," *Christian Science Monitor* (Washington, D.C., November 2003), <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1113/p01s03-woiq.html>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Pfiffner, "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army," 78–79.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

former senior government official under the Reagan administration, who would have helped to construct a new Iraqi government.⁹¹ Finally, there was the glaring fact that several major policymakers and experts, including US generals in the field, the Secretary of State, and the National Security Adviser were not even consulted on the decision to dissolve the Iraqi Army and change the occupation and reconstruction plans.⁹² Thus the sorry history of the Iraq War is littered with instances in which the leadership in Washington either did not gather proper information on the situations and others' views, ignored most insights such intelligence and reflection would have gained them, and did not attempt to use those insights to improve US policy to secure US interests.

Conclusion

These two case studies, the Opening of China and the Iraq War, demonstrate that when properly used, strategic empathy can be a boon to a nation's grand strategy and when ignored it can bring harm to the core national interests. If America is to better understand other actors in the international system, especially rival actors, then it must learn to look at the world from their point of view and to use those insights to more effectively pursue US interests. Already there are practices and institutions that recognize the importance of knowing the other. US intelligence agencies, military, and diplomatic officials collect information on other actors and organize it for use by policymakers. That is the first step of strategic empathy.

The second is to use that information to attempt to fully understand the other side's view point, something that is more controversial and less common in some quarters. Those who focus on historiography, who constantly interact with members of another actor, and units deliberately

⁹¹ Ibid., 77.

⁹² Ibid.

tasked with knowing the other, such as the CIA's Red Cell, are places where the seeds of strategic empathy have taken root and are fertile ground from which the rest can learn. Special attention should also be heeded to organizations that research and advocate for alternative means of understanding and dealing with other actors, such as the United States Institute for Peace and those in the military who prize more Sun Tzu-like approaches to strategy and in running their simulations.

Finally these burgeoning methods of understanding other actors must be expanded and done with an eye to how they can best serve America's core national interests. This last step brings strategy empathic back to its point of being a tool of US statecraft and not just some fad or mental exercise. Strategic empathy can work well but it also should not be viewed as a panacea to any deficits in US grand strategy. After all, it is important to note that as with all relationships, including those between states or non-state actors, it takes two to tango and strategic empathy is no different. While Washington cannot control whether other actors decide to practice strategic empathy to understand where the US is coming from, policymakers can at least decide that the US can do so for itself and advance its interests more effectively in the process. As Sun Tzu said, we must know both ourselves and the enemy. Selling our foreign policy to achieve our national interests doesn't work well if we don't know what the other person wants or understand how or what they think and why. Strategic empathy isn't just a question of better cooperation with other actors to get what we want. It is also most certainly not a form of fluffy soft-power messaging or a form of appeasement. Strategic empathy is a tool to more effectively advance American national interests through understanding other actors, thus lowering costs, minimizing backlash, and ultimately getting what we want.

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