DECODING THE ADVERSARY

Strategic Empathy in an Era of Great Power Competition

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Effective strategy requires strategic empathy. Yet what strategic empathy is and how to practice it remain unclear. As critics warn, the concept is vague and can lead to overly sentimental policymaking. Proponents, however, maintain that strategic empathy is necessary to avoid strategic failure and can reduce the potential for spiraling conflict and miscalculation. This article clarifies the concept, including its linkage to strategy, and offers the framework of strategic narratives as a means for employing strategic empathy so that strategists can develop the necessary mindset to succeed in an era of great power competition.

Retired Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster routinely exhorts US policymakers to employ strategic empathy to better understand how foreign countries behave.[1] He claims strategic empathy is necessary to avoid strategic failures caused by American hubris and narcissism: "We should reject narcissistic tendencies, adopt a reasoned approach to foreign policy based on strategic empathy, and sustain national security and defense strategies that acknowledge the agency that rivals, adversaries, and enemies exercise over the future."[2]

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1. H. R. McMaster, "The Retrenchment Syndrome: A Response to 'Come Home, America?,'" *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2020); McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020); McMaster, "How China Sees the World: And How We Should See China," *Atlantic,* May 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/; and McMaster, "Developing Strategic Empathy: History as the Foundation of Foreign Policy and National Security Strategy," *Journal of Military History* 84, no. 3 (2020).

2. *Hearing on Global Security Challenges, Before The Senate Armed Services Committee*, 117th Cong. 5 (2021) (statement of retired Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, US Army), https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/.

McMaster's argument for empathy is not entirely novel. As one scholar recently noted, "Empathy is not a new concept in international relations or strategy."[3] Indeed, in 1966, 1984, and 1991, a US Information Agency research officer argued for "realistic empathy" to better understand the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Iraq, while former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's first lesson from his reflections on the Vietnam War was to "empathize with your enemy."[4] Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also exhorts in his memoir that US failures in Afghanistan resulted from policymakers being "profoundly ignorant about our adversaries and about the situation on the ground."[5]

Applying strategic empathy in future planning is essential. After all, military strategy requires "astute analysis of friendly, neutral, adversary, and enemy interests and will."[6] Further, Joint doctrine discussing the information environment argues, "the Joint Force must change how it views, plans, and executes operations" by developing "the ability to understand the perceptions, attitudes, and other elements that drive behaviors."[7] The need for strategic empathy is especially acute given the 2022 *National Defense Strategy*'s focus on deterrence. As one political scientist explains, three decades of research on deterrence emphasizes one crucial fact: "It is the perceptions of the potential aggressor that matter, not the actual prospects for victory or the objectively measured consequences of an attack."[8]

Despite the calls for strategic empathy and evidence of its importance, what it is and how to practice it remain unclear. To address these issues, this article argues strategic empathy concerns itself with understanding the interests and motivations of others in order to shape their behavior in support of one's national interests. This process is enacted through employment of strategic narratives and analysis of others' narratives. Political actors, whether individuals or a collective, use these narratives to define and mobilize political communities toward their future goals.

In this regard, strategic narratives provide a useful entry point from which foreign observers can attain information regarding the interests, motivations, and future policy directions of others. Such narratives also indicate how such information can be used to shape foreign behavior in ways aligned with one's own strategic objectives. Taken together, approaching strategy through strategic empathy requires one actor,

3. Claire Yorke, "Is Empathy a Strategic Imperative? A Review Essay," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46, no. 5 (2023): 2, https://doi.org/.

4. Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 2017); Ralph K. White, "Misperception and the Vietnam War," *Journal of Social Issues* 22 no. 3 (1966); White, "Empathizing with Saddam Hussein," *Political Psychology* 12, no. 2 (1991); and White, *Fearful Warriors: A Psychological Profile of US-Soviet Relations* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

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

6. *Strategy*, Joint Doctrine Note 2-19 (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [CJCS], 2019), vi.

7. *Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment*, Joint Publication (JP) (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2022), 19.

8. Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 7, https://www.rand.org/.

via strategic narratives, to consider—although not necessarily accept—the needs and concerns of others and to be willing to adapt one's own behavior and messaging to resonate with foreign audiences. Defining strategic empathy, including its linkage to strategy and international politics, helps clarify what strategic narratives are and how they function to achieve strategic empathy.

Empathy and Security Studies

Broadly speaking, 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."[9] Empathy is thus action-oriented and includes both cognitive and affective dimensions. The cognitive dimension, known as "perspective taking," is the practice of conscious, deliberate attempts to understand how others perceive and experience the world. In contrast, empathy's affective dimension focuses on attempts to align one's feelings with others by understanding their emotional states and how those emotions factor into their behavior.[10]

Empathy is distinct from concepts like sympathy or compassion. Whereas sympathy and compassion both imply a prosocial and benevolent attitude toward others, empathy does not inherently require such positive regard.[11] In other words, one can empathize with another person's situation, mindset, and/or emotions without sharing, agreeing, or approving of their perspective.[12] Indeed, the practice of empathy requires one to maintain a distinction between the self and other.[13] Failure to do so not only risks introducing egocentric biases and inaccuracies regarding others' perspectives but can also cause negative interpersonal outcomes when linked to perceptions of self-threat.[14]

Empathy can be applied at both the micro and macro levels. One can engage in empathy to understand an individual's mindset, such as that of political leader Russian President Vladmir Putin. Or one can engage in empathy for a generalized other—a grouping of individuals with shared experiences, values, cultural backgrounds, and other factors, such as Russians more broadly. Both instances require at least some knowledge of the subject. Research shows it is easier to empathize with those more similar to ourselves and harder to empathize with those with whom we

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

10. Yorke, "Empathy."

11. Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 150, 178; White, *Fearful Warriors*, 9; and Krznaric, *Empathy,* ix.

12. Matt Waldman, *Strategic Empathy: The Afghanistan Intervention Shows Why the U.S. Must Empathize with Its Adversaries* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2012), 2, https://static.newamerica.org/.

13. 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.

14. Claudia Sassenrath, Sara D. Hodges, and Stefan Pfattheicher, "It's All about the Self: When Perspective Taking Backfires," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25, no. 6 (2016).

have greater differences.[15] Consequently, US strategists will likely find it easier to empathize with culturally congruent nations than with more culturally divergent nations or nonstate actors.

Strategic Empathy

Strategy requires empathy. According to Thomas Schelling, strategic situations are those whereby "the best course of action for each player depends on what other players do."[16] Accordingly, the most fundamental solution concepts in game theory assume a player's ability to view the game from another's perspective.[17] Beyond strictly rationalist perspectives of strategic behavior, humanists argue empathy is critical in understanding the human landscape within which strategy achieves its desired ends.[18] Empathy, then, is foundational to all theories of strategic behavior, including perspectives from idealism (constructivism), liberalism, realism, feminism, and neo-Marxism with a core thread of international relations research associating the absence of empathy with policy failures and greater insecurity.[19]

Analytically, the term strategic empathy is best understood as a more focused subcategory of empathy. As stated, strategic empathy entails one's attempt to understand another actor's affective and cognitive perspectives of a situation in order to craft a response that advances one's own national interest. If practiced correctly, strategic empathy is a crucial factor in gaining information about an adversary or ally's motivational thinking with emotional considerations as important as cognitive considerations.[20]

Yet the strategic goal does not end in information gathering. Gaining insight into others' worldviews achieves strategic outcomes only when that information is applied: it must be used to design one's behavior in a manner such that the targeted other draws the desired conclusions from it.[21] In other words, strategic empathy ensures one's strategic behavior aligns with the other's perceptions in order to influence that other's behavior in

15. Peter Goldie, "How We Think of Others' Emotions," *Mind & Language* 14, no. 4 (1999); Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Amy Coplan, "Will the Real Empathy Please Stand Up? A Case for a Narrow Conceptualization," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49, no. 1 (2011).

16. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 3.

17. Tania Singer and Ernst Fehr, "The Neuroeconomics of Mind Reading and Empathy," *American Economic Review* 95 no. 2 (2005).

18. Yorke, "Empathy."

19. Joshua D. Kertzer, Ryan Brutger, and Kai Quek, "Perspective Taking and the Security Dilemma: Cross-national Experimental Evidence from China and the United States," October 1, 2023, *World Politics* (forthcoming), https://jkertzer.sites.fas.harvard.edu/; and Yorke, "Empathy."

20. John D. Grover, *Strategic Empathy as a Tool of Statecraft* (Washington, DC: Center for the National Interest, 2016), http://cftni.org/; and Joshua D. Kertzer and Dustin Tingley, "Political Psychology in International Relations: Beyond the Paradigms," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018).

21. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

ways supportive of one's national interests. Mere comprehension of others' interests falls short of achieving one's strategic outcome if not combined with action.

For example, when the Carter administration normalized relations with China, progress occurred only when National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski unabashedly labeled the Soviet Union a threat to global security while sharing US intelligence on Soviet missile locations with Chinese leaders. In contrast, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's prior negotiations with Chinese officials failed due to his measured discussion of US-Soviet relations. Despite both US officials' knowledge of the Sino-Soviet split and China's interest in combatting Soviet influence, only Brzezinski was able to communicate US policy in a manner resonant to Chinese leaders, including his usage of more emotive descriptions of Soviet character and interests.[22]

Obstacles to Empathy

In the realm of international politics, understanding other actors is easier said than done. As classical realism notes, the anarchical structure of the international system breeds uncertainty and incentivizes actors to misrepresent private information to others.[23] Consequently, failures of empathy frequently lead to security dilemma thinking whereby actions taken by one state to augment its own security leads others, in response, to increasingly fear for their own security, resulting in spiraling conflict.[24]

In addition to structural challenges posed by the international environment, human factors can make empathy harder to employ. McMaster highlights one of these areas by discussing the problems of hubris and narcissism. Focusing on US foreign policy decision-making specifically, McMaster asserts that US beliefs in American superiority and past military dominance lead policymakers to ignore the wants and needs of others, overemphasize US agency, and discount others' abilities to shape the strategic environment.[25]

The United States is not alone when struggling to empathize with others. Leaders of other nations inaccurately focus too heavily on their own perceptions of threat while discounting their adversaries' sense of vulnerability.[26] Studies show rational and moral thought processes are inhibited when humans are dealing with emotionally charged issues.[27] During conflict situations, practicing empathy is more difficult when

22. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Collins, 1985), 197–219.

23. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1985); and James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995).

24. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978); Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (1968); and Jervis, *Perception*.

25. McMaster, *Battlegrounds*.

26. Janice G. Stein, "Building Politics into Psychology: The Misperception of Threat," *Political Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1988).

27. Grover, "Strategic Empathy"; Karla McLaren, *The Art of Empathy: A Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2013), 272–74; and 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.

opposing parties demonize the other, fueling in-group/out-group mentalities that reinforce negative stereotyping and superiority differentiation, which then prompt greater egoistic behavior.[28]

Despite these challenges, an aspect of international relations research suggests empathizing with others helps prevent and manage conflict. One analysis argues empathy is crucial to breaking out of the security dilemma and can generate greater appreciation for the causes of fears in others, thereby mitigating actions that would otherwise lead to greater feelings of insecurity or threat.[29] Studies have found that putting oneself in another's shoes is "pivotal" to the de-escalation of spiraling conflict and that empathy can serve as an "antidote" to the overestimation of one's importance, mediating the prevalence of enemy images and narratives of enmity that do not reflect the realities and complexities of the situation.[30] As a recent study on cross-national empathy shows, prompting individuals to see international issues through the eyes of other states can increase domestic support for international cooperation.[31]

Yet a more nuanced analysis suggests the practice of empathy can have a dark side as well. In competitive situations, engaging in perspective taking can accentuate perceptions of conflict, "akin to pouring gasoline on a fire."[32] If actors perceive each other as having opposing goals, perspective taking can make cooperation less likely by heightening awareness of conflicts of interest and reducing trust.[33] Moreover, actors with strong emotional attachments to their in-group identity who engage in perspective taking of a hostile out-group may see the out-group as more of a threat to their own self-identity when social identity is involved.[34] When nationalism comes into play, individuals deriving their self-esteem from membership within their national community may become more prejudicial toward a hostile out-group when asked to engage in perspective taking.[35]

While these studies demonstrate the complexities of empathetic thought processes in international politics, they fall short in explaining how strategic empathy is enacted. Practitioners are thus left with instructions to improve their perspective-taking skills without consideration as to what ends to apply them toward.[36] This position

28. Garnett.

29. Nicholas Wheeler and Ken Booth, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

30. Joshua Baker, "The Empathic Foundations of Security Dilemma De-escalation," *Political Psychology* 40, no. 6 (2019); and Yorke, "Empathy."

31. Don Casler and Dylan Groves, "Perspective Taking through Partisan Eyes: Cross-national Empathy, Partisanship, and Attitudes toward International Cooperation," *Journal of Politics* 85, no. 4 (2023).

32. Jason R. Pierce et al., "From Glue to Gasoline: How Competition Turns Perspective Takers Unethical," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 10 (2013).

33. Kertzer, Brutger, and Quek, "Perspective Taking."

34. Mark Tarrant, Raff Calitri, and Dale Weston, "Social Identification Structures the Effects of Perspective Taking," *Psychological Science* 23, no. 9 (2012).

35. Kertzer, Brutger, and Quek, "Perspective Taking."

36. Allison Abbe, "Understanding the Adversary: Strategic Empathy and Perspective Taking in National Security," *Parameters* 53, no. 2 (2023).

seeks to improve the quality of information for information's sake alone, focusing on immediate, tactical interactions among interlocutors rather than strategically shaping the security environment. Yet approaching strategic empathy through the framework of strategic narratives not only mitigates misperceptions but also offers a framework to influence foreign actors' perceptions and behaviors.

A Lens for Achieving Strategic Empathy

Storytelling has long been a central mechanism by which humans understand others' worldviews. Stories—via books, movies, or other storytelling media—present a cast of characters with various motives unveiled by the narrative's plotlines and scenes of action. Audiences lose themselves in well-delivered stories, finding their own attitudes and intentions changed.[37] Over time, stories form one's own understanding of the world, including their and others' places within it. For these reasons, assessing foreign actors' strategic narratives offers a useful entry point into understanding and shaping the strategic worldviews undergirding their foreign policy behavior and military strategies.

Scholars of international relations increasingly recognize the power of strategic narratives in international politics. According to one analysis, political actors use strategic narratives as a communication tool to give determined meaning to the past, present, and future in their pursuit of some political goal.[38] Such narratives operate on three levels: 1) international system narratives describing how the world is structured; 2) national narratives describing the story of the state, including its values, goals, and identity; and 3) issue narratives describing why a certain policy is needed or disputed.

Strategic narratives serve multiple strategic functions. First, narratives about the state help unite domestic audiences toward collective action by defining a shared identity. Stories about a nation's history, founding principles, moral integrity, and cultural prestige all supply the ontological foundation of a state. This foundation explains who constitutes the "we" (present), which allows the collective to progress by establishing not only what "once was" (past) but also what "ought to be" (future).[39] In the US context, these foundational myths include American democratic exceptionalism and beliefs in the universal value of individual rights. When activated, these values enable the United States to pursue a global agenda. When in doubt, or during times of division, US policy turns inward.

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37. John Deighton, Daniel Romer, and Josh McQueen, "Using Drama to Persuade," *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, no. 3 (1989); Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); and Tom van Laer et al., "The Extended Transportation-Imagery Model: A Meta-analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Consumers' Narrative Transportation," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 5 (2014).

38. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

39. Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2015).

Second, strategic narratives make international politics intelligible. Comprehending the overwhelming complexity of the world necessitates cognitive shortcuts.[40] Narratives provide key sensemaking functions by connecting events together within a larger cause-effect plotline, explaining why certain agents act in the manner reported. On the international level, this includes characterizing one's allies and enemies, reinforcing one's own identity through contrasts to others, and describing routine ways in which international agents treat each other in pursuit of state interests. Such narrative contrasts are evident in the case of the Cold War when US leaders referred to the Soviet Union as an "evil empire"; in US policy following the 9/11 terrorist attacks through the global war on terrorism; and, most recently, in US descriptions of strategic competition with China as a battle between autocracy and democracy.

Over time, national identity narratives and stories about the international system sediment within society, forming cultural cognitive boundaries enabling and constraining the activities of political actors.[41] States form national security cultures derived in part by their national mythologies, narrative constructions of past events, and relationships with historical friends and foes.[42]

Although strategic narratives can adapt and change, effectively doing so requires the new narrative elements to be interpreted within the previous ones to preserve a sense of before and after.[43] Prominent strategic narratives can therefore imbue state policy with enduring master frameworks shaping future policy behaviors in unanalytical and nonreflexive manners.[44] Russia's anti-Western foreign policy can be read as a legacy of the Cold War while the Chinese Communist Party's narrative of rejuvenating China's strength is rooted in a "century of humiliation" and deeper sense of Chinese civilizational importance. Thus it is possible to identify a country's narrative trajectory and future policy pathways, making assessment of others' strategic narratives a fertile ground to engage in strategic empathy.[45]

Military Understanding through Narrative

Narratives play a crucial role in military operations. Joint Publication 3-04, *Information in Joint Operations,* states "narratives are an integral part of campaigns, operations,

40. Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006).

41. Janet Hart, "Cracking the Code: Narrative and Political Mobilization in the Greek Resistance," *Social Science History* 16, no. 4 (1992).

42. Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008).

43. Felix Berenskoetter, "Parameters of a National Biography," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 1 (2014); and Subotić, "Narrative."

44. James V. Wertsch, "The Narrative Organization of Collective Memory," *Ethos* 36, no. 1 (2008).

45. Robert S. Hinck et al., *The Future of Global Competition: Ontological Security and Narratives in Chinese, Iranian, Russian, and Venezuelan Media* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

and missions."[46] As one scholar explains, "Military strategy is situated in broader political and public spheres that are linked by storytelling."[47] Narratives and military strategy work together to influence adversaries by uniting perceptions and understandings of security, interests, action, and intent. Narratives' strategic impacts stretch across the continuum of competition by setting, shaping, and contesting the information environment prior to and during conflict.

Approaching strategic empathy through narrative analysis has multiple practical and theoretical benefits for strategists. First, viewing empathy as a narrative competency best explains how one comes to empathetically understand others and helps avoid egocentric biases. Rather than attempting to understand others' actions by examining their current mental states, a narrative approach can uncover the why of such actions by placing them within a deeper contextual plotline attuned to others' historical and cultural experiences. Narratives offer a "form or structure" that helps one frame their understanding of others' behaviors. By understanding others' actions through narratives, "we start to see others engaged in their actions, not simply in terms of the immediate and occurrent context," and "we start to see them as engaged in longer-term projects (plots) that add meaning to what they are doing."[48]

Second, pursuing strategic empathy through narrative understanding contributes toward a more accurate conceptualization of warfare. Citing Carl von Clausewitz, one philosophy scholar explains, "War is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter," with treatment of it as such "bound to lead to one mistake after another."[49] Incorporating empathy thus helps balance the military's "customary predisposition" toward physical dynamics of warfare including its human elements.[50]

Whereas physical sciences rely on etic understandings of the world, or knowledge produced through only observable behavior, empathy concerns itself with emic understandings, or knowledge of the meanings and interpretations that drive human behavior.[51] Although an etic understanding of warfare is necessary, by itself it is insufficient. Empathy marks an epistemic necessity to warfare, aligned with Clausewitz's human conceptualization of it, by establishing understandings of others' symbolic perceptions of their strategic situations.[52]

Analysis of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine illustrates the problems of an overly etic approach to war. Focusing on Russia's overwhelming materiel advantage,

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46. *Information in Joint Operations*, JP 3-04 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2022), II-5.

47. Nick Blas, "Beyond Storytelling: Strategic Narratives in Military Strategy," *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower* 2, no. 1 (2023), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

48. Shaun Gallagher, "Empathy, Simulation, and Narrative," *Science in Context* 25, no. 3 (2012): 371.

49. Kevin Cutright, "The Empathetic Soldier," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 27, no. 2 (2019); and Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 149.

50. Cutright, 279.

51. Robert H. Lavenda and Emily Ann Schultz, *Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 43.

52. Cutright, "Empathetic Soldier."

strategists believed that Kyiv would quickly fall. Instead, facilitated by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership,the invasion of the capital ignited Ukrainian nationalism and led to stout resistance.

Evaluating Strategic Narratives

While strategic narratives can help unveil other actors' views of the strategic landscape, as with empathy, misreading them risks miscalculation. Avoiding the traps of incorrectly applying strategic empathy onto others' strategic narratives requires a brief consideration of what makes strategic narratives effective. Strategic narratives achieve a persuasive effect not through factual accuracy but by the degree to which they resonate with audiences. This resonance comes from the story's coherence and fidelity.

Narrative coherence describes whether the story makes internal sense—whether the characters and their motives and actions flow as expected, with audiences needing sufficient detail or characterization of the agents involved to be able to draw desired conclusions from the story. Narrative fidelity reflects whether a story has external validity—whether it rings true to audiences by aligning with their life experiences, values, and previous outcomes witnessed.[53]

Narrative fidelity thus is both a resource and constraining factor for elites when constructing strategic narratives. At any given time, multiple narratives circulate among various social institutions, including those constructed by media and governmental structures.[54] Elites then activate and deactivate certain narrative elements over others to garner support for specific policy agendas. For the story to define audiences' social reality such that they support or act toward the intended goal, however, a critical mass of social actors must accept it as common sense.[55] Effective narratives therefore must fulfill the audience's need for meaning and purpose while maintaining some level of credibility.

As all political communities possess their own political myths and narrative origin stories, the persuasiveness of a strategic narrative relies on the degree to which such stories can claim universality and cohere with others' strategic narratives.[56] Narrative persuasion then is grounded in empathy and achieves transnational effects by invoking shared political values and emotions. Effective international narratives can coax nations into supporting foreign campaigning, such as when the

53. Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communications Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984).

54. Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson, "Reclaiming the Epistemological 'Other': Narrative and the Social Construction of Identity," in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Craig Calhoun (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).

55. Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Charlotte Epstein, *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Antiwhaling Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

56. Olivier Schmitt, "When are Strategic Narratives Effective? The Shaping of Political Discourse through the Interaction between Political Myths and Strategic Narratives," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 4 (2018).

United Kingdom and France used Alliance narratives in 2011 to garner American support for military intervention into Libya.[57] They can also be used by adversaries to undermine such commitment, such as Russia's usage of strategic narratives in the 2014 Ukraine conflict.[58]

Toward a Framework for Assessing Strategic Narratives

Given the strategic function of narratives and the inner grammar of their construction, analyzing how foreign actors construct and project narratives about the international environment can reveal meaningful insight into their national interests and key levers of support or contestation. Due to their public nature, strategic narratives offer one of the most available entry points into empathizing with others. An analysis of strategic narratives begins first by identifying prominent speeches, media coverage of elite rhetoric, and/or countries' strategic documents. Next, a descriptive examination of the core elements of the narrative is required—that is, strategists must identify the actions, agents, scenes, instruments, and motives provided in the story and how these elements operate at issue, national, or international levels.

Third, strategists must evaluate the narrative's logic, setting aside their own cultural and cognitive biases in an attempt to understand how and why the narrative serves some purpose for the political actor(s) involved. If some element of the narrative seems absurd, factually incorrect, or too alien to comprehend, the strategist should seek further understanding from regional experts or other sources of information.

Finally, only after the strategist achieves a sufficient understanding of the other's narrative should they begin to consider how their own objectives align or conflict with others'. In doing so, strategists seek ways to articulate their interests in a manner intelligible to others such that the target audience's behavior is shaped either in cooperative support of the strategist's interests—the logic of soft power and attraction—or through the target audience's recognition and acceptance of the strategist's deterrence messaging—the logic of hard power.

As strategists analyze foreign actors' strategic narratives and articulate their own, they must bear in mind the intersubjective nature of international affairs. While strategists may focus their inquiry on one specific foreign actor, they must not eschew the interests and roles of other countries or political actors in interpreting and reinforcing perceptions of global affairs. Although countries' capabilities vary, building coalitional support for one's narrative, or reducing that of a competitor's, can multiply the persuasive impact of a strategic narrative such that it achieves a critical mass of support from strategic stakeholders, resulting in greater narrative dominance.

As such, when analyzing others' narratives and reflecting upon one's own interests, strategists need to consider the degree of coherence and fidelity their depiction of

57. Laura Roselle, "Strategic Narratives and Alliances: The Cases of Intervention in Libya (2011) and Economic Sanctions against Russia (2014)," *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 3 (2017): 103.

58. Maria Snegovaya, *Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, September 2015), 7, https://www.understandingwar.org/.

world affairs may hold for multiple audiences. The more insular one's interests are, or the more specific one articulates those interests, the less space others may have to share in the story, reducing the narrative's strategic impact. Enactment of strategic empathy is thus a two-way process, with the pursuit of one's interests bounded by the target audience's wants and needs; this requires not only an ability to articulate one's interests effectively but also a willingness to, at times, adjust one's policy or behavior so that it aligns with others.

Consideration of others' narratives is especially important in a post-Cold War era as globalization continues to both connect and fragment political communities along cultural and economic fault lines. Unfortunately, two decades of US policy has largely ignored others' interests while emphasizing cosmopolitan values that have little resonance for developing nations. Evidence of this comes from global debates over Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Instead of viewing the conflict as an affront by Russia to the global order, media narratives and political speeches from Middle Eastern countries and the Global South characterized it as merely a war between Russia and the West.

In both cases memories of the past influenced the perception of the present. For Arabic nations, European countries' warm welcome of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's onslaught was contrasted to the plight of Syrian refugees rejected by Europe. For those in the Global South, the story was but another example of imperialism at work with weaker nations left to bear the burden of higher food and energy costs.[59] While such narratives are only partially correct—German Chancellor Angela Merkel initially welcomed many Syrians at political cost—they demonstrate the latent effects of ignoring others' material needs, which US competitors like Russia and China actively highlight to discredit the current global order.

Enacting Strategic Empathy

At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin warned that the world had reached a "decisive moment" where it needed to "seriously think about the architecture of global security."[60] In doing so, he projected an international system narrative rebuking the Western-led order as deeply "flawed," lacking "moral foundations," and leading to a "world in which there is one master, one sovereign"—a world that is "pernicious" for "all those within this system" to which Russia would actively contest.[61]

This speech marked the start of Russia's revisionist trajectory, followed by Russia's military invasions of Georgia in 2008, interventions on behalf of Bashar Al-Asad in Syria, and annexation of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014. Throughout this period, Moscow increasingly projected identity narratives lauding Russia's military capability and economic resiliency,

59. Colum Lynch, "The West Is With Ukraine. The Rest, Not So Much," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/; and Neil MacFarquhar, "Developing World Sees Double Standard in West's Actions in Gaza and Ukraine," *New York Times*, October 23, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/.

60. Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, Munich, Germany, transcript, http://en.kremlin.ru/.

61. Putin.

demonized the West, and anointed itself as the champion of conservative religious values—all of which granted the nation a greater sense of agency and purpose.[62]

While critical of such claims, the West largely fell victim to Russia's narratives. Western societies not only turned inward, succumbing to Russia's antiglobalist agenda by pursuing isolationist policies and increased questioning of NATO's relevance, but also ceded to Russia's security claims. Most notably, in 2014, a *Foreign Affairs* analysis contended that the 2014 Ukraine crisis was "the West's fault."[63] Although this analysis of Russian interests held weight, the conclusion—blaming the West while excusing Russian aggression—marked a sympathetic approach toward Russian interests grounded in an etic understanding of the structural dynamics of international politics rather than one of strategic empathy. Such analysis not only neglects the desires and agency of other nations, but also weakens Western resolve while emboldening Russian behavior.

Although Moscow eventually fell victim to its own strategic narcissism, prevention of future conflict and the pursuit of US national interests are best served not by sympathizing or ignoring competitors' interests but by enacting strategic empathy. This includes a mixture of hard and soft power efforts to articulate the rules of the international system in ways resonant to others and a willingness by the United States and partner nations to defend them. Successful strategic empathy thus requires the study and assessment of others' security challenges as a means for aligning other actors' will in support of US national security; it includes the evaluation of competitor, partner, Ally, and neutral nations' identities and interests as a means to shape regional and global information spaces in ways that dissuade aggression by others.

Fortunately, some evidence of this approach can be seen with current US policy toward China. The US narrative of strategic competition provides space both for cooperative and competing engagements with others. Engagement with regional parties helps raise the costs of China's aggression while solidifying others' commitment toward a rules-based regional order. Such efforts will need to continue, including greater investments into narrative persuasion backed with meaningful action to solidify expectations and routinize cooperative behavior. In the Asia-Pacific region, this means the United States and its Allies must create alternative, multilateral economic opportunities while highlighting the deleterious consequences of China's mercantilist policies. The United States must also continue to link Beijing's support for Moscow to maintain commitment from European nations to rethink their interests with China, including the use of their collective bargaining power to set fairer trade practices and reduce domestic dependencies on Chinese trade.

Ultimately, China's dangerous attempts to remake the international order must be shown as such. Chinese President Xi Jinping's narrative vision of the "China Dream," offers key leverage points to influence China's future trajectory, in particular its continued ability to deliver economic growth and regain the sense of the loss of prestige

62. Hinck et al., *Future.*

63. John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014).

and cultural leadership. In both cases, the United States' ability to demonstrate Xi's lack of progression toward such goals can shift Chinese leaders' strategic calculus through efforts to link Xi's policies to a declining security environment and reduced moral authority, evident in a coalescence of competing forces, a distasteful partnership with Russia, and weakening domestic growth.

Finally, while characterizing the US-China relationship as a battle between democracy and autocracy may be an alluring identity narrative, reframing the competition as one over economic growth, rather than values, avoids discrediting the entirety of China's leadership with such a narrative likely more resonant to developing nations lacking the luxury of ideological considerations. Taken together, affirming how far China has come while noting how far it could fall if it pursues its militarism can reframe its future actions, but only if the United States commits to doing so. Successful strategy toward China, then, requires more than just an understanding of what China wants; it requires US strategists to act upon and communicate this understanding in such a way to keep the world's second largest economy from turning away from the very system that enabled its growth.

Conclusion

As the United States reenters a period of great power competition, this one characterized by its relative power decline, strategic empathy becomes increasingly critical for strategy practitioners. The distinct advantage of empathy in its capacity to deepen our understanding of the adversary can potentially unveil vulnerabilities and avenues for maintaining a competitive advantage, while identifying areas for cooperation as well. The strategic empathy framework detailed above enables one to detect disruptions through analysis of others' strategic narratives. Built upon layered analysis, this understanding facilitates the juxtaposition of varying narratives, which reveal others' inherent power structures, objectives, and underlying strategic logics. This in turn gives insights into the core values and interests of others and assists in identifying pivotal shifts that may call for deeper scrutiny. Beyond these strategic utilities, the framework aids in gauging the effectiveness of campaigns that can challenge others' narratives.

Regardless of the geopolitical backdrop, the universal truth remains: there is an ever-present benefit in comprehending others more deeply and authentically. By harnessing insights offered by strategic empathy through a narrative framework, one can navigate the intricate web of great power competition and ensure their strategies are not just reactive but also forward-thinking and transformative, leading to continuing advantage. Æ