

# STRATEGIC EMPATHY

The Afghanistan intervention shows why the U.S. must empathize with its adversaries.

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As the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, it leaves violence and uncertainty in its wake. The election of a new Afghan president gives some grounds for optimism and could improve the fraught relationship between Afghanistan and the U.S. But no Afghan election since the 2001 intervention has brought about a diminution in violence – and the conflict shows no signs of abating. The Taliban is powerful, tenacious and increasingly deadly. Civilian casualties are rising and the fighting forces some 10,000 Afghans from their homes every month.<sup>1</sup> The linchpin of the U.S. exit strategy, Afghan national security forces, have critical capability gaps and are suffering huge losses of up to 400 a month due to escalating insurgent attacks.<sup>2</sup> The Afghan government is corrupt and anemic, reconstruction is faltering and the region continues to be unstable.

Over the past twelve years, the United States has spent \$650 billion dollars in Afghanistan and lost over 2,000 lives.<sup>3</sup> Close to 20,000 U.S. service members have been wounded.<sup>4</sup> Democratic institutions have been established in Afghanistan, and there has been progress in human rights, infrastructure and services, such as health and education. But how did such vast and sustained investments not deliver a more favorable outcome? Conditions were undoubtedly challenging, but most observers – and indeed U.S. officials – agree that major

mistakes were made. To name but a few, the U.S. backed power-holders widely seen by Afghans as abusive and unjust, which undermined the Afghan government's legitimacy and generated powerful grievances; coalition forces caused too many civilian casualties; aid was often wasteful or ineffective, and swung from being insufficient, in the early 2000s, to excessive, thereby fueling corruption; and there was no effective U.S. political strategy for Afghanistan or the region.\*

But the most egregious error of the United States was to pursue a strategy founded on a misreading of its enemy. As former Defense Secretary Robert Gates acknowledges, the United States was “profoundly ignorant about our adversaries and about the situation on the ground.... our knowledge and our intelligence were woefully inadequate.”<sup>5</sup> It was assumed the Taliban posed such a threat to the West that it had to be defeated. This was mistaken on two counts: the threat posed by the Taliban was minimal and their defeat was improbable. During the 2000s, from an operational standpoint, U.S. knowledge of the Taliban improved. In fact, officials were deluged with information

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about what insurgents were doing; they knew less about who they really were. In essence, most U.S. officials were unable to “get inside their minds.”

What was missing in U.S. policy-making was empathy: 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 share the other’s thoughts, feelings and perceptions, or, indeed, approve of them. An empathic approach involves the assimilation of diverse information, including social, historical and psychological details, and a conscious effort to see the world through that person’s eyes. Thus, it serves the first demand of strategy: know your enemy. Crucially, empathy can help leaders anticipate how enemies and perceived allies are likely to act and react, and help avoid strategic errors. As the theorist Robert Jervis has said: “The ability to see the world and oneself as others do is never easy and failures of empathy explain a number of foreign policy disasters.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the intervention in Afghanistan was marked by an absence of this kind of understanding, especially as regards the Taliban and Pakistan’s military, which are considered below.

## Misjudging the enemy

Given the Taliban’s role in sheltering al Qaida prior to 9/11, it is hardly surprising that many U.S. officials saw the Taliban as a threat – but it was a mistake to conflate the two groups. The Taliban did not invite Osama bin Laden to Afghanistan, and its relationship with the terrorist group was strained, influenced by Pakistan and highly dependent on personal relations between the group’s respective leaders. Today, there are undoubtedly extremists within the Taliban, which is comprised of various networks and sub-groups, but links to al Qaida are limited and borne out of expediency.<sup>7</sup> The Taliban does not subscribe to al Qaida’s global jihadi ideology. It has never conducted an attack

outside Afghanistan, nor is there evidence that it seeks to do so. Conversely, there are few Afghans in al Qaida’s leadership, which is based in Pakistan; in fact, there are as many German nationals on the UN’s al Qaida sanctions list as there are Afghans.<sup>8</sup> For years, senior U.S. officials have said there are fewer than 100 al Qaida operatives in Afghanistan and they pose no real threat.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, Taliban leaders understand what provoked the U.S. intervention in 2001, that forced them from power, and they have repeated both publicly and privately that they will not allow other groups to use Afghan soil to launch attacks against other countries. Most Taliban leaders want safety, recognition and influence – and know that any relationship with al Qaida would threaten that.

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Paradoxically, towards the end of the 2000s, U.S. officials mistakenly believed the vast majority of Taliban foot-soldiers were fighting for money, which led to coalition “reintegration” efforts to lure them away from the insurgency through employment and educational incentives. Unsurprisingly, these efforts made little discernable impact on the strength of the Taliban. Thousands of Talibs have been killed or injured since 2001, and while securing a source of income is a factor in explaining their motivations, it cannot explain why so many were willing to risk their lives.

In reality, the Taliban cannot be simply categorized as either fanatical or mercenary. The movement encompasses a wide range of individuals, with multiple and varying

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motivations, who have coalesced around core notions of what they see as resistance to invasion, defense of Islam and action against injustice perpetrated by those in power. An empathic perspective can throw light on these factors. Simply put, a small but significant number of Afghans mistakenly perceived U.S. forces as invaders who threatened their safety and their country's sovereignty, religion or way of life. This perception was formed over years of coalition airstrikes, ground assaults or night raids, which caused large numbers of civilian deaths and injuries. Between 2007 and 2010 alone, the coalition and Afghan forces caused 2,500 civilian deaths, including hundreds of women and girls.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the perpetrators, whether NATO forces or their Afghan allies, were seen as having impunity, and redress was seen as piecemeal and inadequate. Too often, operations destroyed or damaged property, and house searches or even routine encounters were seen as aggressive and intrusive. It is therefore not surprising that some Afghans came to disbelieve U.S. leaders when they said they sought to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan – even Afghan political leaders share this distrust. Nor is it surprising that Afghans who lost family members, friends or neighbors joined the insurgency out of anger, for retribution or to resist perceived aggressors. In this way, the U.S. presence galvanized resistance.

The perception of U.S. aggression, which was evident from this author's interactions with Taliban fighters and commanders between 2009 and 2012, is easier to appreciate if one considers the powerful historical, cultural and social factors that have influenced Afghan perspectives.<sup>11</sup> Not least, Afghans have misgivings about foreign troops rooted in their country's colonial and Soviet experiences, and many are influenced by nationalist or fundamentalist sentiment as espoused by religious, community or tribal leaders. A sense of foreign invasion – as a minority of Afghans saw it – was reinforced by the massive western presence, and the outright corruption, predation and abuse of power by warlords and strongmen widely despised by Afghans but propped up by NATO. And

nothing is more likely to rouse men to fight than perceived foreign aggression and an acute sense of injustice.

An empathic approach points to other factors that have influenced Afghans' decisions to fight and which are apparent in field research.<sup>12</sup> For those who were unemployed and destitute, the insurgency offered status, a sense of purpose and an "honorable" way for them to feed their families; while for those educated in hard-line madrassas, the jihad was a religious duty. Many have been drawn into the insurgency through ties to a particular group of fighters, known as a Mahaz, typically led by a prominent Taliban figure, or through the efforts of a community, tribe or faction to resist government predation or gain the upper hand in a local conflict or feud. Some are motivated by personal ambition or criminal opportunism; others are driven by grievances, such as the persecution of Talibs after the 2001 intervention; and many have merely sought to protect themselves and their families by siding with those whom they expect to win.

Recognizing these factors does not in any way amount either to endorsing or justifying the Taliban insurgency. It is understanding, not approval. Who, in their right mind, could approve of the Taliban's indiscriminate roadside and suicide attacks, or their systematic killing of civilians who support the Afghan government? But knowledge of Taliban motivations is the kind of information that is crucial for decision-makers. Indeed, by the mid-2000s, the entire war-fighting and state-building strategy rested on the premise that the Taliban posed a threat to the West. This, in turn, rested on a conception of the Taliban as extremists who were intrinsically hostile and therefore aligned with al Qaida. An appreciation of Taliban motivations calls this central assumption into question.

An in-depth, empathic understanding of the Taliban would also have helped U.S. leaders make a better judgment about the efficacy of a strategy that was based on the assumption that the Taliban could be defeated through attrition. In the mid-2000s the Taliban was generally estimated to have

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10,000-20,000 fighters.<sup>13</sup> Despite massive losses, the movement is now believed to have up to 60,000 core fighters; it launched more than twice as many attacks in 2012, after the U.S. surge, than it did in 2008.<sup>14</sup> The Taliban's extraordinary resilience rested on the powerful misperception of invasion and the web of motivating factors described above, which enabled the movement to expand its overall strength in spite of heavy attrition. An earlier appreciation of these factors might also have pointed to the potential for a negotiated outcome – something that was opposed by most U.S. decision-makers until 2011. Indeed, an empathic approach helps to explain why a significant number of Taliban leaders were, and still are, interested in talks.

In particular, for several years Taliban leaders have been under pressure from Afghan communities to desist from fighting, and pressure from within the movement's own ranks to reduce losses and deliver results. They have long resented living in exile and being manipulated by Pakistan's military intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Taliban leaders are concerned about the potential re-emergence of an anti-Taliban coalition backed by regional powers, as happened in 2001. They know that since the 1990s the expectations of ordinary Afghans have changed: Afghan citizens expect decent public services, which the Taliban cannot deliver. Moreover, many Taliban leaders want international recognition; they fear once again becoming a global pariah, recognized by only a handful of countries and dependent on Pakistan, as they were in the 1990s. Paradoxically, they want recognition from the West, and the perceived security and political benefits that accompany such recognition.

Under powerful misapprehensions of the Taliban, U.S. decision-makers missed these perspectives and discounted the possibility of negotiations until late 2010, when the first high level U.S.-Taliban dialogue took place – some nine years after the initial intervention.<sup>15</sup> By that time, the U.S. had launched a military surge, seen by insurgents as a declaration of war, which generated a gulf of mistrust

between the parties, and undermined the position of moderate or pragmatic Taliban leaders who favored talks. Compounding this, President Obama had already declared that the U.S. troops would start to withdraw in 2011, undercutting insurgent incentives for talks. There is no certainty that talks would have succeeded, but the U.S. had two major sources of negotiating leverage: the presence of U.S. troops that the Taliban had vowed to expel, and the Taliban's craving for international recognition. In sum, misunderstanding the Taliban meant that a course by which the U.S. might have mitigated the threat from al Qaeda and avoided countless deaths and enormous costs, was never seriously explored until the odds were stacked against it. As James Dobbins, the U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, said in November 2013, if reconciliation, among other things, had been pursued earlier, "I think the insurgency would either have been avoided or attenuated and clearly many lives – Afghan as well as allied – would have been saved."<sup>16</sup>

## Misjudging our "ally"

The United States also seriously misread Pakistan's military, especially the ISI, which has long provided sanctuary and support to the Afghan Taliban. Indeed, Pakistan houses the engine-room of the Afghan insurgency. From Pakistan, the Taliban leadership plans and directs operations in Afghanistan, it oversees the acquisition and transfer of munitions, manages logistical bases, runs training camps, and organizes fundraising and recruiting. For years, U.S. decision-makers believed they could persuade, incentivize or coerce Pakistan's military leaders into taking steps to restrain Afghan insurgents. This helps to explain why the United States has provided \$27 billion of assistance to Pakistan since 2001.<sup>17</sup> But Pakistan's support to the Taliban was a non-negotiable insurance policy. Some U.S. officials, taking an empathic approach, came to realize this by the late 2000s. As the U.S. Ambassador in Islamabad, Ann Patterson, said in a leaked cable of September 2009: "There is no chance that Pakistan will view enhanced assistance levels in any field as

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sufficient compensation for abandoning support to these groups [the Taliban and others], which it sees as an important part of its national security apparatus against India.”

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If U.S. officials had come to appreciate this perspective sooner, they might have realized that even with a military surge the United States was unlikely to be able to defeat an enemy that was not only strongly motivated, but which, due to the mindset of Pakistani officials, had access to neighboring sanctuaries, and a vast and secure operational infrastructure.

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A more systematic empathic approach might have penetrated the Pakistani mindset at an earlier stage of the conflict. It would have discerned that Pakistan’s military leaders were preoccupied with, even paranoid about the perceived threat from India, rooted in the dispute over Kashmir and a succession of military clashes, including the 1971 India-Pakistan war, which led to the secession of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Accounting for over half the population of Pakistan as it was then, this colossal loss was a source, not only of humiliation, but also of enduring existential anxiety. In the eyes of Pakistan’s military leaders, the possibility of a strong, Indian-allied government in Afghanistan – Pakistan’s north-west flank – was an unacceptable threat to Pakistan’s national security. This was compounded by several factors: India’s growing political and economic presence in Afghanistan; reports of Indian support to Baloch separatist insurgents in Pakistan; Afghanistan’s unwillingness to recognize the Durand line; and Afghan irredentist claims for Pashtun areas of Pakistan, which hosts twice as many Pashtuns as Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pakistan was facing a serious

and growing threat from Islamic militants it had once nurtured, who coalesced as the Pakistani Taliban in 2007. Since 2003, these groups have reportedly killed over 5,000 Pakistani police and soldiers and some 18,000 civilians.<sup>18</sup> There was simply no real prospect of Pakistani military leaders confronting the Afghan Taliban, which constituted, in their eyes, an essential geostrategic tool.

If U.S. officials had come to appreciate this perspective sooner, they might have realized that even with a military surge the United States was unlikely to be able to defeat an enemy that was not only strongly motivated, but which, due to the mindset of Pakistani officials, had access to neighboring sanctuaries, and a vast and secure operational infrastructure. They would also have realized the critical importance of Pakistan in brokering political reconciliation with the Taliban. It is widely agreed that no peace process can succeed without Pakistan’s support, and yet, even today, it is kept at arm’s length from the process.

It is not only the Taliban and Pakistan’s military that the U.S. misread. Its understanding of the Afghan government – once seen as its principal ally – was sorely deficient, as underscored by the troubled U.S.-Afghanistan relationship, and the role of government predation and misgovernance in undercutting coalition counter-insurgency goals. Given the obvious importance of understanding key adversaries and “allies,” what explains the failure of the United States to get inside their minds? The answer lies in organizational and attitudinal factors that act as constraints to empathy, which are considered respectively.

## Constraints to empathy

Effective empathy depends upon a minimal level of knowledge of the actors under consideration. But U.S. State Department personnel rules that favor generalists meant that even a decade after 2001 the U.S. lacked Afghanistan specialists. At the height of the surge in early 2011, the U.S. had 100,000 troops in Afghanistan and just six Pashto speaking Foreign Service officers in the whole region.<sup>19</sup>

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Frequent rotations of U.S. diplomats – 90 per cent of the Kabul embassy staff leave annually – has created enormous discontinuity and even further inhibited the accumulation of expertise.<sup>20</sup> This has also prevented the formation of genuine, lasting relationships with Afghan nationals that are crucial to achieve a high level of understanding. Risk aversion means that U.S. diplomats have generally been confined to fortified compounds, rarely meeting with Afghans; those they have met usually echo their thinking. Security risks are real and must be managed, but the success of the mission may depend as much on calculated risk-taking by diplomats as by American soldiers, many of whom have risked their lives on a daily basis.

Ideally, intelligence work should provide a nuanced, accurate picture of adversaries and allies. But coalition intelligence gathering in Afghanistan has been driven by operational imperatives, such as force protection or offensive action. As Michael Hayden, a former U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) director, has said: “A lot of things that pass for analysis right now is really targeting.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in Afghanistan the C.I.A. has run several powerful paramilitary militias, and directed drone strikes in the border areas. The consequence, in the words of another American intelligence official, Major General Michael Flynn, is that “U.S. intelligence officers and analysts can do little but shrug in response to high level decision-makers seeking the knowledge, analysis, and information they need.”<sup>22</sup>

Another powerful reason why U.S. officials have often failed to get inside others’ minds is because they have had no intention of empathizing with them. Empathy requires a cognitive shift: simulating or imagining another’s experience, mindset and perspective. The best diplomats, spies and politicians empathize instinctively: it underpins their ability to interpret, anticipate or influence others. But this is rarely acknowledged, and it is therefore practiced unsystematically. To a point, military “red-teaming” (war role-playing) draws on an empathic approach, but it focuses on identifying vulnerabilities and is largely for operational

purposes. The C.I.A.’s “Red Cell,” a diverse team tasked with challenging conventional thinking and anticipating future security threats, may also, in some cases, use an empathic approach. But this is not established policy, and understanding adversaries is only one aspect of the group’s work. On the whole, empathy is not only neglected but actively avoided by U.S. officials. There appear to be six main reasons for this eschewal of empathy, none of which is convincing.

First, there is a concern that attempting to see another’s perspective will attenuate U.S. officials’ conviction in, or commitment to, any given national cause, or even that they will “go native.” But such misgivings need to be weighed against the significant potential benefits; moreover, the attempt to empathize need only be undertaken by a limited number of officials. Second, empathy, in general usage, has been mistakenly conflated with sympathy, and in some disciplines it has been used to mean a sharing of another’s feelings. This need not be the case: empathy as practiced by a government can be considered as an analytical tool that does not require any kind of isomorphism or the sharing of feelings. And it can be used to comprehend another’s state of being – not only another’s emotions but also their mindset and perspective. Third, empathy is seen as vague. True, it is difficult to empathize with a high level of accuracy, especially given cultural barriers, ambiguous information, and changing circumstances. There is also immense variability within any one actor or group. But much diplomatic and intelligence work faces similar problems and is necessarily imprecise. That does not mean it is without value. In reading the theater of war, military leaders tend to prefer numbers over nuance (witness the proliferation of “metrics” on Afghanistan); but there can be false comfort in quantifiables. Measurability does not equate to utility. As indicated above, judgments about how an adversary thinks, feels or perceives are often essential for strategy-making.

Fourth, empathy, mischaracterized as purely a sentimental impulse, has been marginalized by theoretical and practical



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approaches to foreign policy that are dominated by assumptions about the rational pursuit of power and self-interest. The cases of the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan's military, considered above, suggest that a complex web of rational and non-rational factors help to explain others' behavior. Empathy is an effective means of discerning those factors. Fifth, empathy is avoided because it yields insights that often conflict with an actor's self-image. In Afghanistan, U.S. officials generally saw their efforts as advancing freedom and promoting stability; yet, as discussed above, some Afghans saw Americans as invaders. Naturally, it is hard to accept others' conceptions of us when they contradict or call into question our own self-image, but this cannot justify ignoring such beliefs, especially if they motivate armed resistance. Sixth, America's military supremacy and its strategic culture, which elevates the efficacy of force, appears to have led to the conception that the U.S. doesn't need to understand others. The cost, death toll and legacy of American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq strongly suggest otherwise.

## The value of empathy

Even if these organizational and attitudinal obstacles can be overcome, why should empathy yield any greater insights than simply acquiring reliable information, applying logic or common sense, and drawing informed inferences? It may not and empathy is certainly no panacea. It should be considered as an additional tool rather than a substitute for conventional methods. However, the characteristics of empathy mean it is well suited to render insights about other actors.

Empathizing forces the empathizer to assimilate, holistically, the widest possible range of relevant information – including social, cultural, historical and psychological data – in order to simulate another's way of thinking and perspective. Conventional intelligence or analytical work is often more targeted, focusing on prominent issues or concerns that reflect western priorities,

such as operational goals. While understandable, this approach can lead to the neglect of certain factors, which may seem inconsequential, but which have an enormous, cumulative impact on another's way of thinking. In Afghanistan, for example, conceptions of national identity influenced by historic struggles against outsiders or predilections for conspiracies about foreign involvement may seem, to outside observers, as comparatively insignificant, but they had major implications for counter-insurgency efforts.

But empathy's unique quality is that it requires a change of perspective, and because how something is seen and interpreted depends on the eyes through which it is seen, this shift of perspective can enhance understanding, even with the same information at hand. Moreover, the practice of empathizing helps to mitigate certain sentiments or biases that distort the way decision-makers process information, and which are especially prevalent in war-time. In particular, there is a tendency for officials to oversimplify the conflict, see it in Manichean terms and demonize the enemy, propensities that are compounded by propaganda for war-fighting, institutional or political ends. There is a tendency to assume that all actors opposing the enemy must be allies. And, as noted, officials are especially bad at appreciating how they themselves are seen by others. In fact, due to a tendency known as "attribution error," decision-makers often attribute an adversary's behavior to intrinsic hostility rather than to situational factors, and typically underestimate their own role in provoking the adversary's response. Taking another's perspective can help them appreciate that their own actions, which they regard as evidently taken in self-defense or in the collective interest, can be seen by others as acts of aggression. All of these tendencies were evident in U.S. conceptions of the conflict in Afghanistan, and each had major consequences for policy-making. Empathy is uniquely suited to help officials cut through these cognitive distortions and acquire a deeper, more objective understanding of other actors.

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The case of Afghanistan underscores the potential value of cognitive empathy. Admittedly, insights derived from empathy might not have outweighed the U.S. military's faith in counter-insurgency, or President Obama's domestic political calculations. But empathy could have made the U.S. aware of the likely resilience of the Taliban and the intransigence of Pakistan's ISI, each of which rendered U.S. strategic goals profoundly unrealistic. It might have led to earlier consideration of the potential for negotiations with the Taliban, and equipped U.S. officials with the knowledge to help such talks succeed. Moreover, empathy might have helped the United States avoid a costly, arduous and ultimately unsuccessful counter-insurgency campaign.

But is Afghanistan an isolated case of U.S. failure to empathize?<sup>23</sup> A brief consideration of two very different cases, Iran and Ukraine, suggests not. American officials have long seen Iran as driven by ideological fanaticism and implacably hostile to the United States. In reality, Iran's policies have been driven largely by what they see as American-Israeli hostility, and regional threats and rivalries. Despite hardline elements, the Iranian leadership is often rational and pragmatic, as indicated by its recent nuclear rapprochement with the West. Yet the U.S. misconception of Iran has had major consequences: it underpinned confrontational policies that caused Iran to give significant support to U.S. adversaries in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Syria.

In Ukraine, as John Mearsheimer has pointed out, the United States failed to anticipate Russia's recent intervention because "few American policymakers are capable of putting themselves in Mr. Putin's shoes."<sup>24</sup> Had they done so, they would have realized that Russian leaders would see President Yanukovich's removal and the establishment of a pro-western government as a direct threat to Russia's core strategic interests. Consider the background to the crisis, especially the eastwards expansion of NATO, which Russia sees as a hostile alliance, along with the bloc's 2008 announcement that Ukraine "will become" a member of NATO.<sup>25</sup> For Russian leaders, colored by a Cold War mindset, the emergence of a government in Kiev aligned with the West and partnered by the European Union was not just an encroachment on their legitimate sphere of influence but a national security threat that demanded a forceful response.

## What should be done?

Given this neglect of empathy, what should be done about it? Initially, the United States should acknowledge the potential utility of empathy and seek to develop the empathic analytical skills of certain, high-level diplomatic, intelligence and military officials. In doing so, it should draw on extensive insights about the practice of empathy from social and political psychology, the body of work on empathic accuracy, and possibly even neuroscience, which is uncovering the mental processes behind empathy. It should establish high-level mechanisms to enable U.S. officials to step outside conventional thinking, so often shaped by a prevailing institutional narrative, and ensure that empathic insights are taken into account in the foreign-policy decision-making process. The U.S. should make at least five further institutional or policy changes which would enhance its ability to empathize with and understand others.

First, steps should be taken to develop long-term cadres of regional and country experts in State Department and other relevant agencies; personnel rules should be changed to



ensure that generalists are not favored over specialists. Second, tours of duty should be extended, or repeat tours encouraged, language training enhanced, and movement constraints reduced to enable U.S. officials to travel widely and to forge relationships with a range of individuals over sustained periods. Third, the U.S. should overcome its reluctance to meet with the enemy. As U.S.-Taliban talks indicate, this does not amount to conferring legitimacy on an adversary. Instead, talks can be strategically prudent and yield useful information about an adversary, put them under pressure or give momentum to moderates. Fourth, efforts should be made to ensure that information gathering and intelligence work is not unduly distorted by operational imperatives, or, indeed, subjected to political pressures. Mechanisms should be established to monitor and curtail any such trends. Fifth, in making assessments of other actors, concerted efforts should be made to draw on a wider range of sources of information, especially independent field research and academic studies of the culture, sociology and history of a country or region.

In enhancing understanding, empathy cannot prescribe policies – but it can help ensure U.S. foreign policies are made on a more informed basis. Crucially, empathy can provide insights into how other actors are likely to perceive and react to what the United States does, and expose false assumptions that sometimes underpin strategic mistakes. This kind of information is critical as the United States weighs options for action – coercive or otherwise – in Syria, Ukraine and beyond. The case of Afghanistan shows that the human, financial and geo-political costs are too high for empathy to be ignored.

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<sup>1</sup> “Afghanistan Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2013,” (Kabul: U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Feb 2014), pp. 1 and 12.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, “Afghan forces suffering too many casualties, says top Nato commander,” *The Guardian*, 2 September 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Katzman, “Afghanistan: post-Taliban governance, security, and US policy,” (Washington, D.C.: Congressional

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Research Service, 4 March 2014), pp. 42 and 57.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), p 589.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Jervis, “Leadership, Post-Cold War Politics, and Psychology,” *Political Psychology* 15(4), 1994, 769–777, p. 771.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, “Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda,” (New York: Center for International Cooperation, Feb. 2011).

<sup>8</sup> See:

[http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list.shtml](http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/aq_sanctions_list.shtml)

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Rob Taylor, “U.S. General says al Qaeda just surviving in Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, 26 July 2013.

<sup>10</sup> U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “Annual Reports on the Protection of Civilians.”

<sup>11</sup> Matt Waldman, “Dangerous liaisons with the Afghan Taliban: the feasibility and risks of negotiations” (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> For example: Sarah Ludbury and Cooperation for Peace and Unity, “Testing hypotheses on radicalisation in Afghanistan” (Kabul, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> “Afghanistan’s Taliban: War without end,” *The Economist*, 25 October 2007.

<sup>14</sup> “Trends through August 2012 and Trends through December 2012” (Kabul: ISAF, 24 September 2012 and 22 January 2013). Antonio Giustozzi, “Taliban networks in Afghanistan” (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the brink: the future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan* (New York: Viking, 2012), pp. 113-116.

<sup>16</sup> Damien McElroy, “US let Taliban come back from defeat,” says top envoy, *The Telegraph*, 1 November 2013.

<sup>17</sup> “Direct Overt U.S. Aid Appropriations for and Military Reimbursements to Pakistan, FY2002-FY2015,” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 26 March 2014). See: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/pakaid.pdf>.

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<sup>18</sup> Anatol Lieven, “Pakistan: the mess we can’t ignore,” *The New York Review of Books*, 20 March 2014.

<sup>19</sup> “Inspection of the Office of the United States Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan,” (Washington, DC: Inspector General of the U.S. Department of State, June 2011) p 21.

<sup>20</sup> “Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts,” (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2009), p. 22, and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: the war within the war for Afghanistan* (New York: Knopf, 2012) p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Mazzetti, “C.I.A. to Focus More on Spying, a Difficult Shift,” *The New York Times*, 23 May 2013.

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Flynn, Matt Pottinger and Paul Batchelor, “Fixing intel: a blueprint for making intelligence relevant in Afghanistan,” (Washington DC: Center for New American Security, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> It is likely that many other states fail to empathize. Ralph White cites various historical examples in “Empathy as an intelligence tool,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence* 1, No 1 (1986), pp. 57-75. However, this article addresses the problem in the United States.

<sup>24</sup> John Mearsheimer, “Getting Ukraine Wrong,” *The New York Times*, 13 March 2014.

<sup>25</sup> “Joint Statement – Meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission at the level of Heads of State and Government,” NATO, 4 April 2008.



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