

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Manuscript 3221

Understanding the Adversary: Strategic Empathy and Perspective Taking in National Security

Allison Abbe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Understanding the Adversary: Strategic Empathy and Perspective Taking in National Security

Allison Abbe

ABSTRACT: National security practitioners need to understand the motives, mindsets, and intentions of adversaries to anticipate and respond to their actions effectively. Although some authors have argued empathy helps build an understanding of the adversary, research points to its cognitive component of perspective taking as the more appropriate skill for national security practitioners to have. This article synthesizes previous research on the development and application of perspective taking in analysis and decision making and recommends four ways strategists and practitioners can enhance their ability to gain insight into adversaries.

Keywords: perspective taking, strategic empathy, political psychology, military education, cognitive bias

Do you think Putin is a rational actor?¹ Jake Tapper's question embodies a tendency to examine foreign policy and policymakers' decisions through a lens of rationality. A more useful starting point might have been, "What is important to Putin?"

Historians Zachary Shore and H. R. McMaster have called for strategic empathy as a tool for understanding adversaries and competitors to enable better prediction in the strategic environment.² Defined as stepping into the minds of others, strategic empathy may be essential to understanding the interests of, the motivations of, and the constraints on adversaries. Effective anticipation of and response to adversary actions requires a clear understanding of often ambiguous motives and intentions. Looking into Vladimir Putin's eyes or meeting a competitor face-to-face may have many benefits but

1. Jake Tapper, "Interview with President Joseph R. Biden," CNN (website), October 11, 2022, 1:53, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2022/10/12/joe-biden-full-exclusive-interview-jake-tapper-tapperctn-sot-vpx.cnn>.

2. H. R. McMaster, "Developing Strategic Empathy: History as the Foundation of Foreign Policy and National Security Strategy," George C. Marshall Lecture Series in Military History, *Journal of Military History* 84 (July 2020): 689–97; and Zachary Shore, "A Sense of the Enemy," *Joint Force Quarterly* 65 (April 2012): 32–37.

would not be a particularly effective means to learn motives and intentions if those intentions include deception.³

Prior to Shore's and McMaster's calls for strategic empathy, Ralph K. White argued that "realistic empathy" would better enable Western observers to understand Soviet Communist motives and fears.⁴ Similarly, William Ickes emphasized empathy's importance even more broadly, asserting that empathy characterizes "the most tactful advisors, the most diplomatic officials, the most effective negotiators, the most electable politicians, the most productive salespersons, the most successful teachers, and the most insightful therapists."⁵ Ickes and other psychologists referred to empathy as "everyday mind reading," a simple term for a complex process of inference that combines observation, prior knowledge, memory and reasoning, and self-regulation to understand and relate to others.⁶ Claire Yorke advocates for expansive empathy in grand strategy to consider not only the adversary, but also other actors who influence decision making or are impacted by strategic decision-making outcomes.⁷

The social and behavioral sciences' well-established body of research on empathy provides a solid foundation for national security strategists who seek to add strategic empathy to their skill sets. This article advances practitioners' skills for understanding adversaries and competitors and highlights those skills for development in national security education. This paper first synthesizes the literature to explore empathy *by whom*, *for whom*, and *for what purpose*. Second, previous research on empathy concepts provides direction for the practical application of strategic empathy and points to perspective taking as the key skill. The article then offers recommendations to develop perspective taking as a skill in practitioners, to improve perspective taking through collaboration in teams, and to address errors and uncertainty in perspective taking for strategic purposes. It also acknowledges the unique challenges and opportunities that

3. Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Conference by President Bush and Russian Federation President Putin," White House: President George W. Bush (website), June 16, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/06/20010618.html>.

4. Ralph K. White, "Communicating with Soviet Communists," *Antioch Review* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1967-68): 458-76.

5. William Ickes, "Introduction," in *Empathic Accuracy*, ed. William Ickes (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 2.

6. Jean Decety and Philip L. Jackson, "The Functional Architecture of Human Empathy," *Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews* 3, no. 2 (June 2004): 71-100.

7. Claire Yorke, "Is Empathy a Strategic Imperative? A Review Essay," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2022): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2022.2152800>.

national security contexts present for the application of perspective taking. Finally, the paper identifies research gaps and challenges.

Empathy by Whom

Shore focused on empathy for understanding adversaries and highlighted its benefits for political scientists, policy-making elites, and intelligence practitioners.⁸ Strategic empathy is also needed to work with partners and allies. Advancing a strategy of integrated deterrence, the *2022 National Security Strategy* goes beyond calls for the mere reinvigoration of security relationships and recommends integration with partners and allies to combine capabilities seamlessly.⁹ Likewise, the same document notes that partnerships and alliances are its center of gravity.¹⁰ Understanding the interests, priorities, and motives of partners and allies is therefore critical to the confrontation of shared security challenges, which makes strategic empathy a key enabler among leaders across the defense enterprise.

The *2022 National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* thus expand strategic empathy's relevance for leaders and strategic advisers. Through greater consideration of counterparts' motives, concerns, and intentions, strategic empathy can help leaders identify common ground and opportunities for influence and collaboration. Fortunately, empathy is already rooted in military competency frameworks. In recommendations for strategic advisers, the Center for Army Lessons Learned includes empathy among the principal attributes of model advisers working with foreign counterparts.¹¹ *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, includes empathy as an aspect of a leader's character and sets expectations that Army leaders will show empathy for subordinates within the organization and for

8. Zachary Shore, "A Sense of the Enemy."

9. Joseph R. Biden, *National Security Strategy: October 2022* (Washington, DC: White House, 2022), 22, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

10. Lloyd J. Austin III, *2022 National Defense Strategy for the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022), 2.

11. *Advising at the Senior Level: Lessons and Best Practices*, Handbook No. 19-06 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2019).

external actors.¹² NATO research on multinational leadership similarly indicates empathy's importance as an interpersonal leadership competency.¹³

These documents provide a picture of whom (observer) empathy is expected in national security: strategic decisionmakers, strategists and strategic advisers, intelligence personnel, and leaders across levels. The breadth and number of practitioners across these categories suggest empathy should be a foundational skill for professional development. Next, empathy for which actors and for what purposes distinguishes strategic empathy from general empathy.

Empathy for Whom and for What

The primary difference between strategic empathy and empathy in general is for *whom* (the actor) and *for what* (the purpose) empathy is given. In empathy for whom, the relationship of the observer with the actor, or target of observation, is key. Organizational contexts for previous research on empathy have centered on health-care professions, psychotherapy, and other behavioral health contexts.¹⁴ In these settings, empathy is viewed in terms of the health-care professional's goal of helping the actor (patient). Empathy is exercised for the actor's (patient's) benefit, and the observer and actor work to advance a shared interest in the well-being of the patient or client. Similarly, interpersonal contexts for empathy have centered on long-standing relationships such as friendships, marriages, or other partnerships. Partners have affiliative motives whereby they engage empathy to care for one another and maintain the relationship. In health-care and interpersonal contexts, shared interests or mutual benefits motivate empathy. By contrast, strategic empathy involves a relationship between an observer and an actor—a competitor, adversary, collaborator, or ally—with diverging interests.

The diverging interests between the actor and the observer result in a second important distinction: empathy *for what*. In strategic empathy, actors and observers may not share interests. Instead, the observer acts in the collective national interest while the actor has distinct or competing interests. The purpose of, or motivation for, strategic empathy therefore starkly contrasts with common conceptualizations of empathy for prosocial or affiliative empathy

12. US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, (Washington, DC: TRADOC, 2019), 2-8, 2-12, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18529-ADP_6-22-000-WEB-1.pdf.

13. Melinda Key-Roberts et al., "Integrated Framework of NATO Multinational Leadership Competencies," in *Leader Development for NATO Multinational Military Operations*, ed. Yvonne R. Masakowski et al., NATO Human Factors and Medicine Research Task Group 286 (Neuilly-sur-Seine, FR: NATO, September 2022).

14. Pauline Irving and David Dickson, "Empathy: Towards a Conceptual Framework for Health Professionals," *International Journal of Health Care Quality Assurance* 17, no. 4: 212-20, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09526860410541531>.

purposes. Thus, common understandings of empathy may be misleading. Empathy is highly contextual, and competitive motives can decrease empathy, or competitors may selectively engage different aspects of empathy to meet their goals.¹⁵

Dimensions of Empathy

Psychological definitions of empathy commonly include three dimensions: empathic concern, experience sharing, and perspective taking.¹⁶ Empathic concern is the component most reflected in the popular understanding of empathy as synonymous with sympathy.¹⁷ This concern is the compassionate aspect of empathy—caring for others' well-being. Empathic concern is an affective and motivational dimension of empathy, as it involves an observers' motivations to help others or to alleviate others' distress. Experience sharing refers to experiencing another's emotional state, which can occur independent of a cognitive understanding of an actor's perspective. An informal way to convey the two emotional dimensions is feeling *for* another (empathic concern) versus feeling *with* another (experience sharing).

Complementing emotional and motivational dimensions, the more cognitive skill of perspective taking is the attempt to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motives of a target without judgment or agreement.¹⁸ As a separate topic of study, perspective taking is also known as *mind reading*, *theory of mind*, *mentalizing*, or *mental state inference*.¹⁹ Perspective taking is the dimension most consistent with McMaster's framing of strategic empathy as "an understanding of the ideology, emotions, and aspirations

15. Jamil Zaki, "Empathy: A Motivated Account," *Psychological Bulletin* 140, no. 6 (November 2014): 1608; and Adam D. Galinsky et al., "Why It Pays to Get inside the Head of Your Opponent: The Differential Effects of Perspective Taking and Empathy in Negotiations," *Psychological Science* 19, no. 4 (April 2008): 378–84.

16. Mark H. Davis, "Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy: Evidence for a Multidimensional Approach," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44, no. 1 (July, 1983): 113–26; and Erika Weisz and Mina Cikara, "Strategic Regulation of Empathy," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 25, no. 3 (March 2021): 213–27.

17. Natalie H. Longmire and David A. Harrison, "Seeing Their Side versus Feeling Their Pain: Differential Consequences of Perspective-Taking and Empathy at Work," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 103, no. 8 (August 2018): 894–915.

18. Sharon K. Parker, Paul W. B. Atkins, and Carolyn M. Axtell, "Building Better Workplaces through Individual Perspective Taking: A Fresh Look at a Fundamental Human Process," in *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 23, ed. Gerard P. Hodgkinson and J. Kevin Ford (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Interscience, 2008), 149–96.

19. Zaki, "Empathy," 1609; and Julio C. Mateo et al., *Framework for Understanding Intercultural Perspective Taking in Operational Settings* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2016), 3.

that drive and constrain other actors.”²⁰ Thus, strategic empathy is best understood as perspective taking rather than the empathy construct as a whole.

According to behavioral and neuroscientific findings, the three dimensions of empathy are related but distinct. They may be engaged simultaneously, for example, when a parent observes his or her child’s discomfort during an illness. The parent cognitively understands the child’s discomfort based on his or her own prior experience with those symptoms, often adopts the child’s emotional distress, at least temporarily, and attempts to alleviate the discomfort.

Alternatively, empathy dimensions may be engaged separately. For example, a basketball fan may understand the disappointment that a fan of a rival team experiences when his or her team loses an important playoff game. The observer, however, might not personally feel a rival fan’s disappointment, concern for that fan, or hope the rival team will win the next game to reduce his or her disappointment. Thus, perspective taking does not imply compassionate concern, though it can accompany it under some conditions.

The distinction between cognitive and emotional dimensions of empathy matters because engaging different dimensions of empathy has differing outcomes. In contexts where the observer’s goal is to help the actor, experience sharing may benefit the actor but may produce distress in the observer. For example, a health-care professional who engages in experience sharing with her patient may be better able to assess the patient and gain his compliance with a treatment protocol, but she is more likely to experience compassion fatigue as a result.²¹

In contrast, perspective taking is also demanding but can benefit observers. In a business simulation, negotiators who engaged in perspective taking, but not empathic concern or experience sharing, were more likely to satisfy self-interests and find opportunities for joint solutions.²² Even without the emotional demands of concern for the other, perspective taking remains cognitively demanding, and when given a choice, observers often avoid it.²³ Avoiding perspective taking and other dimensions of empathy, however, does not remove the need

20. H. R. McMaster, “The Retrenchment Syndrome: A Response to ‘Come Home, America?’” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (July–August 2020): 183–86.

21. Weisz and Cikara, “Strategic Regulation of Empathy.”

22. Adam D. Galinsky et al., “Why It Pays to Get inside the Head of Your Opponent: The Differential Effects of Perspective Taking and Empathy in Negotiations,” *Psychological Science* 19, no. 4 (April 2008): 378–84.

23. C. Daryl Cameron et al., “Empathy Is Hard Work: People Choose to Avoid Empathy because of Its Cognitive Costs,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 148, no. 6 (June 2019): 962–76.

to understand others' viewpoints, and alternative routes to understanding tend to be less accurate.

Who Has Empathy?

Whether defining empathy and its components as a skill or a trait, research has explored what individual characteristics are associated with higher levels of empathy. Although findings are mixed, Western observers may be at a disadvantage. In several studies, East Asian observers have repeatedly shown an advantage over US observers in correcting for egocentric biases that interfere with perspective taking.²⁴ Egocentric biases cause observers to project their own views onto others.²⁵ For national security strategists and practitioners, egocentrism and its cultural cousin, ethnocentrism, produce mirror imaging, in which observers project personal values, assumptions, and intentions onto others, thereby blinding themselves to the drivers of adversary decisions.²⁶

The theory of mind that enables perspective taking emerges around the same time in children cross-culturally, according to comparisons between children in Beijing and age-matched children in North America.²⁷ Thus, the US deficit in correcting for egocentrism emerges later in the lifespan, suggesting it has sociocultural origins. If barriers to perspective taking are learned in adolescence or adulthood, then perhaps education can decrease them.

Turning to gender, traditional stereotypes suggest women show greater empathy than men, but scientific literature only partially supports this belief.²⁸ Some studies have found that women are higher in the component of empathic concern, but research has generally not found gender

24. Klaus Kessler et al., "A Cross-Culture, Cross-Gender Comparison of Perspective Taking Mechanisms," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 281, no. 1785 (June 2014), 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2014.0388>; Shali Wu et al., "How Culture Influences Perspective Taking: Differences in Correction, Not Integration," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 7 (December 2013): <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00822>; and Shali Wu and Boaz Keysar, "The Effect of Culture on Perspective Taking," *Psychological Science* 18, no. 7 (July 2007): 600–606.

25. Nicholas Epley, "Solving the (Real) Other Minds Problem," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 3 (May 2008): 1455–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00115.x>; and Rachel Karniol, "Egocentrism versus Protocentrism: The Status of Self in Social Prediction," *Psychological Review* 110 (July 2003): 564–80.

26. Montgomery McFate, "The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture," *Joint Force Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (July 2005): 42–48.

27. Louis Moses, "Executive Functioning and Children's Theories of Mind," in *Other Minds: How Human Bridge the Divide between Self and Others*, ed. Bertram F. Malle and Sara D. Hodges (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 11–25.

28. Williams Ickes, Paul R. Gesn, and Tiffany Graham, "Gender Differences in Empathic Accuracy: Differential Ability or Differential Motivation?," *Personal Relationships* 7, no. 1 (March 2000): 95–109.

differences in the accuracy of perspective taking or other social judgment.²⁹ For example, men and women perform equally on empathy-related tasks when rewarded with monetary incentives.³⁰ In other words, baseline motivation, not skill, likely determines gender disparities.

Other traits and abilities are associated with higher empathy. Individuals with higher general cognitive ability and the traits of openness, psychological stability (low narcissism), and tolerance for ambiguity tend to have greater judgment accuracy and perspective taking.³¹ Traits such as extraversion also relate to empathy but may depend on whether the observer can judge from an interpersonal interaction, eliciting information from an actor in conversation.³²

Overlap with Other Skill Sets

Empathy overlaps with other skill sets required by effective leaders and strategic advisers, such as emotional intelligence, cross-cultural competence, and systems thinking. This set is not comprehensive but reflects skills identified in guidance for professional military education. Although research on empathy has sometimes disaggregated its components, at other times research has examined empathy as a holistic construct. As a result, the sections below use the cited research's terminology.

Emotional intelligence is one superordinate construct that encompasses empathy. Daniel Goleman's definition of emotional intelligence includes personal and social competence, with empathy as a part of social competence.³³ He distinguishes recognizing emotions in others from managing relationships because seeing and feeling others' emotions (recognizing) may not imply knowing how to respond (managing). Empirical research has shown an association between emotional intelligence and greater empathic concern and perspective taking, but correlations are small enough to maintain distinctions among these constructs.³⁴ Other emotional intelligence models

29. Richard A. Lippa and Joshua K. Dietz, "The Relation of Gender, Personality, and Intelligence to Judges' Accuracy in Judging Strangers' Personality from Brief Video Segments," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 24, no. 1 (March 2000): 25–43.

30. Kristi J. K. Klein and Sara D. Hodges, "Gender Differences, Motivation, and Empathic Accuracy: When It Pays to Understand," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27, no. 6 (June 2001): 720–30.

31. David C. Funder, "Accurate Personality Judgment," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 21, no. 3 (June 2012): 177–82; and Judith A. Hall, Susan A. Andrzejewski, and Jennelle E. Yopchick, "Psychosocial Correlates of Interpersonal Sensitivity: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 33, no. 3 (September 2009): 149–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10919-009-0070-5>.

32. Hall et al., "Interpersonal Sensitivity," 9.

33. Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013); and Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994).

34. Longmire and Harrison, "Seeing Their Side," 903–4.

similarly indicate empathy is related to, but distinguishable from, emotional intelligence as an ability.³⁵

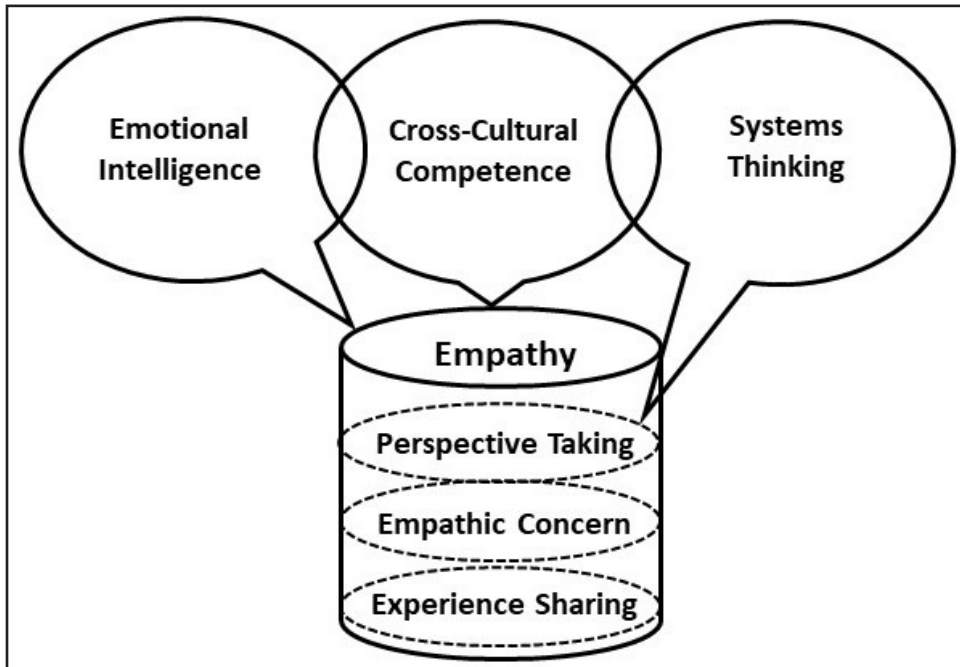


Figure 1. Relationships among empathy dimensions and related constructs

Cross-cultural competence is a second construct that includes empathy. By identifying characteristics Army leaders need to operate abroad, my colleagues and I noted the contributions of empathy (motivation) and perspective taking (a skill) to intercultural effectiveness.³⁶ Building on other research that identified cultural empathy as a multicultural personality trait, findings in one study showed cultural empathy was related to proficiency in foreign languages and interactions with foreign populations among Army soldiers and officers.³⁷ Further, higher levels of cultural empathy were associated with greater cultural intelligence and intercultural efficacy, a self-reported indicator of effectiveness in cross-cultural interactions.

A third superordinate construct, systems thinking, is a critical strategic leadership skill, and many systems thinking models explicitly include

35. John D. Mayer, Peter Salovey, and David R. Caruso, "Emotional Intelligence: New Ability or Eclectic Traits?," *American Psychologist* 63, no. 6 (September 2008): 503–17.

36. Allison Abbe, Lisa M. V. Gulick, and Jeffrey L. Herman, *Cross-Cultural Competence in Army Leaders: A Conceptual and Empirical Foundation*, Study Report 2008-01 (report, Arlington, VA: US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, October 2007).

37. Allison Abbe, David S. Geller, and Stacy L. Everett, *Measuring Cross-Cultural Competence in Soldiers and Cadets: A Comparison of Existing Instruments*, Technical Report 1276 (Arlington, VA: US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, November 2010).

perspectives and perspective taking, empathy's cognitive dimension.³⁸ These models recognize that, in open systems, actors' and stakeholders' viewpoints differ based on their various positions within the system, and systems thinking requires an understanding of these diverging perspectives. Therefore, perspective taking would enable observers to identify more relationships and causal links in a complex system through adopting different lenses. For example, when planning interventions in the complex system of human migration following conflict or natural disasters, adopting the perspective of different actors in the system, including the migrants themselves, their national political leaders, and human-trafficking operators, would improve an observer's understanding of the dynamics driving behavior.

One study found a relationship between systems thinking and empathy on self-report measures.³⁹ As self-report may not be the most appropriate means to measure systems thinking, replication with alternative methods would be beneficial. Consistent with advocates of strategic empathy, some researchers have recommended teaching systems thinking by framing problems within learners' sociocultural contexts and asking learners to incorporate perspectives and historical backgrounds, among other considerations.⁴⁰

These three superordinate constructs include other skills and abilities that potentially overlap beyond empathy alone, but research has rarely measured them together. One exception is research distinguishing cross-cultural competence (using the Cultural Intelligence Scale) from emotional intelligence.⁴¹ Relative to emotional intelligence, systems thinking relies more on the cognitive dimension of empathy, perspective taking, than on emotional and motivational aspects of empathy. In comparison, measures of cross-cultural competence tend to include the dimensions of empathic concern and perspective taking.

The three skill sets of systems thinking, cross-cultural competence, and emotional intelligence increasingly appear in joint professional military

38. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Currency, 1990); Douglas E. Waters, "Understanding Strategic Thinking and Developing Strategic Thinkers," *Joint Force Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (April 2019): 113–19; Ross D. Arnold and Jon P. Wade, "A Definition of Systems Thinking: A Systems Approach," *Procedia Computer Science* 44 (2015): 669–78; Derek Cabrera and Laura Cabrera, *Systems Thinking Made Simple: New Hope for Solving Wicked Problems*, 2nd ed. (New York: Odyssean Press, 2018); and Jacob R. Grohs et al., "Assessing Systems Thinking: A Tool to Measure Complex Reasoning through Ill-Structured Problems," *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 28 (March 2018): 110–30.

39. Adam C. Davis et al., "Systems Thinkers Express an Elevated Capacity for the Allocentric Components of Cognitive and Affective Empathy," *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 35, no. 2 (2018): 216–29.

40. Julio C. Mateo et al., *Systems Analyses of Real Events Practical Exercise Users Guide*, ARI-RP 2020-01 (Fort Belvoir, VA: US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, October 2019).

41. Thomas Rockstuhl et al., "Beyond General Intelligence (IQ) and Emotional Intelligence (EQ): The Role of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) on Cross-Border Leadership Effectiveness in a Globalized World," *Journal of Social Issues* 67, no. 4 (December 2011): 825–40.

education guidance, providing at least indirect demand for the development of empathy in military officers. *The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education and Talent Management (Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision)* explicitly calls for the development of greater emotional intelligence in professional military education, stating,

All graduates should possess critical and creative thinking skills, *emotional intelligence*, and effective written, verbal, and visual communications skills to support the development and implementation of strategies and complex operations.⁴²

Calls for cross-cultural competence and systems thinking are less explicit but implied in Joint professional military education guidance. For example, the *Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision* notes the importance of cultural perspectives:

We shall foster an environment where students are inspired to master the fundamentals of the art and science of war in an atmosphere and culture that encourages intellectual curiosity, stimulates critical thinking, rewards creativity and risk-taking, and *understands the value of multiculturalism and allied perspectives*.⁴³

The Officer Professional Military Education Policy Implementation Manual recommends that learning outcomes include the evaluation of alternative perspectives, the synthesis of strategic thinking, and the understanding of ally and partner interests.⁴⁴ These outcomes reflect aspects of systems thinking and cross-cultural competence and support these attributes in joint and multinational leadership.

Is Empathy the Appropriate Construct?

As a multifaceted concept, the discussion of empathy in national security contexts risks confusion. One common misperception is that empathy only denotes empathic concern. Because popular writing on empathy has focused on its benefits for interpersonal and social contact, observers may assume that the term *empathy* is interchangeable with *compassion* or *sympathy* and

42. Italics added, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management* (Washington, DC: JCS, 2020), 4, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817.

43. Italics added, *Developing Today's Joint Officers*, 7.

44. JCS, *Outcomes-Based Military Education Procedures for Officer Professional Military Education*, CJCS Manual 1810.01F (Washington, DC: JCS, April 2022), appendix A, enclosure G.

may overlook its cognitive component.⁴⁵ Another misperception is that emotions are in opposition to rational military thought.⁴⁶ Sympathy for counterparts or adversaries can indeed be problematic among senior military leaders and advisers if it narrows the focus of decisionmakers or blinds them to their own interests.⁴⁷ Empathic concern also has certain disadvantages and limitations.⁴⁸

The cognitive dimension of empathy—perspective taking—better fits the meaning of strategic empathy, as strategic empathy requires neither sharing another’s emotions nor tending to another’s well-being. It may therefore be appropriate to set aside the term *empathy* in favor of *perspective taking*. Strategic perspective taking may allow strategists and practitioners to maintain appropriate emotional distance while enabling the frame shifting required to understand an adversary’s decision space.

In addition to the contrast discussed above, strategic empathy differs from the vast psychological research on empathy in at least two other important respects. First, the observer’s physical and temporal distance from the adversary limits access and opportunities to collect accurate information. For example, the analyst or practitioner cannot see or hear Putin’s live reactions to updates on operations in Ukraine. Attempts at perspective taking without accurate or current information reduces egocentrism but does not increase accuracy.⁴⁹

Second, the observer acts in the collective national interest or on a strategic decisionmaker’s behalf. As a result, consequences of mistakes reach far beyond observers and actors. As Shore argued, strategic empathy is a high-stakes endeavor, and an inaccurate understanding of adversary or competitor motivations can be catastrophic.⁵⁰ These contextual differences

45. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 96; William Smiley Howell, *The Empathic Communicator* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1982); and J. D. Trout, *Why Empathy Matters: The Science and Psychology of Better Judgment* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

46. Samuel Zilincik, “The Role of Emotions in Military Strategy,” *Texas National Security Review* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 11–25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/24029>.

47. Christian Tripodi, “Peacemaking through Bribes or Cultural Empathy? The Political Officer and Britain’s Strategy towards the North-West Frontier, 1901–1945,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 1 (February 2008): 123–51.

48. Jean Decety, “Why Empathy Is Not a Reliable Source of Information in Moral Decision Making,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 30, no. 5 (October 2021): 425–30.

49. Tal Eyal, Mary Steffel, and Nicholas Epley, “Perspective Mistaking: Accurately Understanding the Mind of Another Requires Getting Perspective, Not Taking Perspective,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, no. 4 (April 2018): 547–71.

50. Zachary Shore, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival’s Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

and risks suggest a distinction between perspective taking and empathy in strategic and competitive contexts.

Shore framed strategic empathy as interpreting pattern breaks—knowing when a change in an adversary’s actions signals an important shift. A single shift can nullify past predictions and large quantities of information. This view requires background knowledge of adversary behavior to recognize when the pattern has broken and highlights the importance of historical knowledge. Whereas other empathy concepts focus more on granular, in-the-moment emotion sharing or concern, strategic empathy draws from a broader range of time and information sources to make inferences. Knowing another person’s mind is difficult even with routine personal interaction. It is all the more difficult from a distance and requires supporting expertise—including historical knowledge and familiarity with the strategic culture. In applying strategic empathy to China’s actions within the first island chain, Major General Joel B. Vowell and Colonel Craig L. Evans argue for an understanding of geography, history, and domestic politics.⁵¹

Of course, applying empathy in high-stakes observations also requires accuracy. Measures of empathy and perspective taking often focus on motivation rather than skill and neglect accuracy. In recent years, intelligence analysis has pursued greater predictive accuracy and has applied lessons from the Good Judgment Project. Funded by the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity, research on forecasting demonstrates the need for feedback, measurement, and accountability to improve judgment.⁵² The same necessity applies to empathy. Practitioner judgments of policymaker motives and mindsets should be assessed for how well they correspond to new facts and information as they emerge.

Personality psychologist David C. Funder has theorized that some actors are more difficult to judge than others.⁵³ For example, judgments of Putin are likely more accurate than those of Kim Jong-Un, due to the relative volume of information available to Western observers and due to these leaders’ relative tenure in power. Empathy and perspective taking depend on the information quantity and quality an observer can draw from. Earlier research on empathic accuracy relied on ground-truth knowledge by using interactions between

51. Joel B. Vowell and Craig L. Evans, “Operationalizing Strategic Empathy: Best Practices from Inside the First Island Chain,” *Strategy Bridge* (website), November 16, 2022, <https://thestategybridge.org/the-bridge/2022/11/16/operationalizing-strategic-empathy>.

52. Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Random House, 2016); and Welton Chang and Philip E. Tetlock, “Rethinking the Training of Intelligence Analysts,” *Intelligence and National Security* 31, no. 6 (February 2016): 903–20.

53. Funder, “Accurate Personality Judgment,” 178.

pairs in a laboratory.⁵⁴ In this case, researchers could compare reports from the actors themselves with the observers' assessments to establish ground truth. In national security settings, ground truth may be more difficult to obtain, and uncertainty is ever-present. Feedback is still possible in some forms, however, and careful analysis of a leader's past foreign policy decisions can be compared with his or her contemporaneous judgments, analyses, and estimates.

Improving Perspective Taking

The tendency to view adversaries and competitors in narrow and simplistic terms has been prominent in US approaches to counterinsurgencies during and since the Vietnam War. Although unmatched in conventional warfare, the United States has been slow to recognize and respond to adversary and partner patterns in irregular warfare and counterinsurgency.⁵⁵ For example, simplistic assumptions about the Afghan security forces and the failure to anticipate their rapid collapse during the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan demonstrate a misunderstanding of actors.⁵⁶ Anchoring on simplistic perceptions can be difficult to overcome, especially with limited access to information. Without timely insights around a pattern break or opportunities to talk directly with decisionmakers, attempts at perspective taking can exacerbate an observer's reliance on stereotypes.⁵⁷

While perspective taking is not a panacea, research supports cautious optimism about perspective taking and its careful application. In addressing realistic empathy, White proposed a useful process applicable to perspective taking that provides 10 steps for practitioners to apply in their roles. Immersion in the available evidence and the application of systematic methods are among the first steps.⁵⁸ To advance and expand upon White's approach, I offer four recommendations here for practitioners and national

54. William Ickes, *Everyday Mind Reading: Understanding What Other People Think and Feel* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2003).

55. Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2006); and John A. Nagl and Brian M. Burton, "Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Modern Wars – A Reply to Jones and Smith," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 1 (February 2010): 123–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402391003603615>.

56. Jonathan Schroden, "Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan's Security Forces," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (October 2021): 45–61.

57. Nicholas Epley and Eugene M. Caruso, "Perspective Taking: Misstepping into Others' Shoes," in *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*, ed. Keith D. Markman, William M. P. Klein, and Julie A. Suhr (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), 295–309.

58. Ralph K. White, "Empathizing with Saddam Hussein," *Political Psychology* 12, no. 2 (1991): 291–308.

security educators based on the evidence above and end with avenues for further research.

First, national security practitioners should pursue perspective taking rather than empathy's experience sharing and concern components. Perspective taking is empathy's most fruitful dimension for national security purposes, though with some qualifications. The benefits of perspective taking accrue with a healthy line of demarcation between personal and other interests. In other words, taking another perspective is a temporary state. Perspective taking is complete when a practitioner recognizes another person's view and then shifts back to his or her own view. This skill requires shifting in and out of others' perspectives—not adopting them—and aligns with developmental approaches to systems thinking in which an observer views the system from the perspectives of multiple actors. It is not enough to take on a different actor's point of view. Instead, systems thinking and perspective taking occur when practitioners move among viewpoints readily and can distinguish the differences and commonalities between them.

Second, practitioners should use feedback to improve their perspective taking.⁵⁹ In other settings, training has improved empathy, especially when that training included not only direct instruction, but also modeling, practice, and feedback.⁶⁰ In one study of forecasting, training to improve forecasting provided ongoing feedback on participants' accuracy, and the training effects exceeded the effect of participants' general cognitive ability, regardless of the training technique.⁶¹ These findings are consistent with the large body of research on trainable cognitive skills and indicate that practice and feedback are key to improvement.⁶²

In education, historical accounts can help guide perspective-taking development, where sufficient information is available to indicate actors' motives, emotions, and decision making. Educators could ask learners to assess actors' mental states at different points in the scenario based on the information available to an observer at the time. Providing learners feedback on how well their assessments align with information revealed later

59. Debby Damen et al., "Lifting the Curse of Knowing: How Feedback Improves Perspective-Taking," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 74, no. 6 (June 2021): 1054–69.

60. Emily Teding van Berkhout and John M. Malouff, "The Efficacy of Empathy Training: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 63, no. 1 (January 2016): 32–41.

61. Welton Chang et al., "Developing Expert Political Judgment: The Impact of Training and Practice on Judgmental Accuracy in Geopolitical Forecasting Tournaments," *Judgment and Decision Making* 11, no. 5 (September 2016): 509–26.

62. Anders K. Ericsson, ed., *Development of Professional Expertise: Toward Measurement of Expert Performance and Design of Optimal Learning Environments* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 418.

or from corroborating sources can improve accuracy in perspective taking over time. As noted, however, judgments of motives and mindsets may involve greater uncertainty than predicting specific actions or quantitative outcomes, as in forecasting tournaments. When ground-truth feedback on perspective taking is impracticable, research indicates reading literary fiction can build empathy.⁶³

Third, evidence points to the use of collaboration to improve perspective taking. A single leader, practitioner, negotiator, policymaker, or social scientist is unlikely to have sufficient insight and expertise to understand adversary or partner perspectives and forecast their actions. Rather, judgment of mindsets and motives must proceed as a team effort. As White recommended, drawing on others' expertise and consulting the best-informed observers improves the accuracy of judgments.⁶⁴ Perspective-enhancing teams may be an informal set of advisers or belong to a formal organizational structure (for example, the staff members who inform policy within the National Security Council or the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy).

Teams outperform individuals at judgment when members make independent contributions and reconcile diverging viewpoints together.⁶⁵ To ensure diverging viewpoints, teams should include diverse backgrounds. Shore and McMaster have recommended a prominent role for historians. Intelligence professionals, social scientists, and other experts on patterns and anomalies should also have a role. The higher the stakes of the decision or observations are, the more important it is to gather and reconcile insights from a range of experts and information sources.

Fourth, researchers recommend maintaining humility and recognizing uncertainty.⁶⁶ People often cannot predict even their own reactions. They often overestimate the extent to which they will act ethically and in their own interests in the future (for example, regarding new year's resolutions and adhering to health advice).⁶⁷ Strategists and practitioners should therefore

63. Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, and Jordan B. Peterson, "Exploring the Link between Reading Fiction and Empathy: Ruling Out Individual Differences and Examining Outcomes," *Communications* 34, no. 4 (December 2009): 407–28; and Nicholas Buttrick, Erin C. Westgate, and Shigehiro Oishi, "Reading Literary Fiction Is Associated with a More Complex Worldview," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (July 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672221106059>.

64. White, "Empathizing with Saddam."

65. Michael Horowitz et al., "What Makes Foreign Policy Teams Tick: Explaining Variation in Group Performance at Geopolitical Forecasting," *Journal of Politics* 81, no. 4 (October 2019): 1388–1404; and James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005).

66. White, "Empathizing with Saddam," 295, 302.

67. Leaf Van Boven and George Loewenstein, "Empathy Gaps in Emotional Perspective Taking," in *Other Minds: How Humans Bridge the Divide between Self and Others*, ed. Bertram Malle and Sara D. Hodges (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 284–97.

not be expected to judge and anticipate others' motives any more accurately than their own. Shifting perspectives should occur with a recognition that errors are likely to happen, and furthermore, that they are often predictable, based on the practitioner's own views. Drawing on former Secretary of State Robert S. McNamara's retrospective insights into conflict in Vietnam, James Blight and Janet Lang argued that curiosity and the avoidance of moral simplicity address this ambiguity.⁶⁸ Decision-making processes should also include a phase that explicitly articulates probable misperceptions, both one's own and the adversary's.⁶⁹

Research Gaps and Challenges for Further Research

The literature shows several gaps research can address to enhance the application of perspective taking for practitioners. First, researchers should more consistently distinguish perspective taking from the broader concept of empathy. Empirical research has demonstrated that the two skills have different implications for competitive contexts, but the literature has not consistently distinguished them, and measures of perspective taking are limited.⁷⁰ Research continues to rely on self-report measures of perspective taking, which may capture perspective-taking motivation rather than perspective taking as a skill.⁷¹ One meta-analysis showed that empathy training increased objective measures of empathy (test scores) to a greater degree than self-report measures of empathy (ratings).⁷² Although this research did not clearly distinguish empathic concern from perspective taking, its findings support the notion that perspective taking may be best developed as a skill rather than as a trait.

Another important research gap is the development and application of perspective taking. Although much research has examined the developmental aspects of acquiring the perspective-taking ability in children, limited empirical research has examined how adult practitioners can develop and implement it. Perspective taking is a complex cognitive skill for which higher education, professional training and education, job experiences, and self-development all likely play a role, but little research

68. James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, "Lesson Number One: Empathize with Your Enemy," *Peace and Conflict* 10, no. 4 (2004): 349–68.

69. White, "Empathizing with Saddam," 294–95.

70. Galinsky et al., "Why It Pays," 383.

71. Mateo et al., *Intercultural Perspective Taking*, 17–18.

72. Teding van Berkhout and Malouff, "Efficacy of Empathy Training," 7.

has examined how to develop the perspective-taking skill in adults and in national security contexts and conditions.

Shore and McMaster argued for two propositions that can be empirically tested: first, that strategic empathy better enables decisionmakers to predict and respond to the behavior of adversaries; and second, that the study of history is a central route to strategic empathy, relative to more quantitative data-based approaches.⁷³ These propositions raise important questions about the relative contributions of differing approaches. What, if anything, does strategic empathy or perspective taking add to national security practice and analysis that is not already in use? What is its incremental value—or does it contrast with existing approaches? Further research may provide new avenues for professional development in civilian education, military, and intelligence education. For example, amid growing emphasis on data analytics and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines, to what extent should programs maintain or increase time for history, literary fiction, and other humanities disciplines?

To develop strategic perspective taking, further research should also examine how to assess the perspective-taking skill. Performance measures for empathic accuracy focus on reading emotions, which may not fully capture the complexity of reading and inferring motives and cognition.⁷⁴ The study of perspective taking has made important advances through using controlled experiments, thereby manipulating perspective taking to test its causal effects.⁷⁵ Laboratory experiments of spatial or visual perspective taking are similarly notable for their contributions to the literature.⁷⁶ Although neither method readily lends itself to direct application for national security strategy, researchers can leverage them to understand how to develop and identify the perspective-taking skill among national security professionals.

In a third challenge, I renew Valerie M. Hudson's calls for interdisciplinary collaboration among international relations scholars and cross-cultural psychologists.⁷⁷ Political psychology has contributed key insights into realistic empathy and continues to thrive as a discipline but has room for growth in its application to foreign policy analysis. Greater connection would

73. Shore, "A Sense of the Enemy," 5; and McMaster, "Developing Strategic Empathy," 695.

74. Ickes, *Everyday Mind Reading*, 61.

75. Eyal et al., "Perspective Mistaking," 567.

76. Nicholas Epley, Carey K. Morewedge, and Boaz Keysar, "Perspective Taking in Children and Adults: Equivalent Egocentrism but Differential Correction," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 40 (November 2004): 760–68.

77. Valerie M. Hudson and Martin W. Sampson III, "Culture Is More Than a Static Residual: Introduction to the Special Section on Culture and Foreign Policy," *Political Psychology* 20, no. 4 (December 1999): 667–75.

benefit both fields of study. Such collaborations may inspire methodological diversity and yield advances in the development of perspective skills for national security contexts.

Conclusion

This article began with the question of Putin's rationality in the context of tactical nuclear weapons. Asking what is important to Putin potentially opens the aperture and might be followed with these questions: What means does Putin consider available to attain his priorities? How does he define success and failure, and what time span does he talk about most? How have his successes, failures, and personal and professional experiences shaped his views of risk? These questions may not differ dramatically from questions that other approaches might raise. Instead, the difference for strategic perspective taking and empathy is in an observer's recognition that personal cultural lenses and experiences may shape his or her answers, that the answers may require more information than is readily available, and that answers should be informed and adjusted by others with differing sources of information. If national security practitioners can maintain that recognition and a willingness to update their analysis as new input becomes available, they will likely find perspective taking an important addition to their toolkits.

Allison Abbe

Allison Abbe, PhD, is a professor of organizational studies at the US Army War College. Her research focuses on the development of leadership and intercultural skills in national security personnel. She previously worked as a research psychologist and program manager in defense and intelligence organizations and holds a PhD in social and personality psychology from the University of California, Riverside. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, *Joint Force Quarterly*, *Government Executive*, *War Room*, *Parameters*, *Military Review*, and *Police Practice and Research*.

Selected Bibliography

- Blight, James G., and Janet M. Lang. "Lesson Number One: Empathize with Your Enemy." *Peace and Conflict* 10, no. 4 (2004).
- Decety, Jean. "Why Empathy Is Not a Reliable Source of Information in Moral Decision Making." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 30, no. 5 (October 2021).
- Epley, Nicholas, and Eugene M. Caruso. "Perspective Taking: Misstepping into Others' Shoes." In *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*. Ed. Keith D. Markman, William M. P. Klein, and Julie A. Suhr. New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2008.
- Galinsky, Adam D. et al. "Why It Pays to Get Inside the Head of Your Opponent: The Differential Effects of Perspective Taking and Empathy in Negotiations." *Psychological Science* 19, no. 4 (2008).
- Longmire, Natalie H., and David A. Harrison. "Seeing Their Side versus Feeling Their Pain: Differential Consequences of Perspective-Taking and Empathy at Work." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 103, no. 8 (August 2018).
- Shore, Zachary. "A Sense of the Enemy." *Joint Force Quarterly* 65 (April 2012).
- White, Ralph K. "Empathizing with Saddam Hussein." *Political Psychology* 12, no. 2 (1991).
- Yorke, Claire. "Is Empathy a Strategic Imperative? A Review Essay." *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2022).