

# How Strategic Empathy Makes for Wiser Foreign Policy

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*Anatol Lieven [explains](#) how strategic empathy is supposed to work:*

This kind of empathy has very valuable consequences for foreign policy. It makes for an accurate assessment of another state establishment's goals based on its own thoughts, rather than a picture of those goals generated by one's own fears and hopes; above all, it permits one to identify the difference between the vital and secondary interests of a rival country as that country's rulers see them.

A vital interest is one on which a state will not compromise unless faced with irresistible military or economic pressure. Otherwise, it will resist to the very limit of its ability, including, if necessary, by war. A statesman who sets out to challenge another state's vital interests must therefore be sure not only that his or her country possesses this overwhelming power, but that it is prepared actually to use it.

American policymakers are notoriously bad at understanding how other governments perceive things and the reasons why they act in the way that they do, and we have seen on many occasions how this failure to understand the other side's thinking has led us into one crisis after another. Our leaders often fail to grasp that they are threatening another country's perceived vital interests, because they frequently deny that the other government has any legitimate interests at all. Instead of trying to see an issue from the other side, our leaders will often insist that there is only one acceptable way of seeing it and it is invariably the same as ours. If the other government responds angrily to this approach, they are then deemed hostile and "revisionist" rather than a normal state reacting as any other state would. Practicing this kind of empathy does not mean agreeing that the other government is right, but it does mean acknowledging what their actual position is rather than projecting one onto them.

**H.R. McMaster** likes to talk a lot about practicing strategic empathy, but in fact he refuses to understand how other governments see the world. He prefers instead to imagine that they are all driven to achieve ideological, expansionist goals just as he is, and then he warns about the aggressive intentions that he has imputed to them. This is exactly the opposite of what Lieven is talking about, and it is nothing more than reading his own hawkish inclinations into everyone else's worldview. If McMaster were willing to see things as the Russian government or Chinese government did, he would understand that they perceive aggressive U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War as a threat, and at least some of their conduct over this same period has been in reaction to American overreaching. But

McMaster doesn't understand this at all. Instead, he insists that the behavior of other states has nothing to do with U.S. actions whatsoever, because to admit this would be to acknowledge that an interventionist foreign policy can create more problems than it solves.

Lieven points out how this lack of empathy has particularly poisoned our dealings with Russia over the last thirty years:

Straightforward Western prejudices (now dignified with the abominable euphemism of "narratives") are part of the reason for these false perceptions derived from the Cold War. The collapse of Communism, however, also led to a growth in Western hubris that led Western policymakers to fail either to listen to their Russian colleagues when they stated Russia's vital interests, or to study Russia in sufficient depth to understand that they were not bluffing but really meant what they said. Instead, you had the tragicomic picture of American officials lecturing Russian officials on the "real" interests of Russia.

This failure to listen and failure to understand account for a lot of the deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations. While Russia has contributed to this deterioration, the U.S. has repeatedly taken actions that our government knew would be perceived as provocations and threats and went ahead with them anyway. Promoting NATO expansion and promising that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually become members were some of the big provocations, but beyond specific issues there is the overarching conceit that Russian interests end at their border while ours are seemingly limitless. If we were in their position, we would have found this intolerable as well. Eventually, Russia was bound to push back, and that is what it has been doing for the last twelve years. Predictably, the pushback has been interpreted in the West as irrational aggression, and this is just more of the same failure to understand why other states act as they do.

If we would avoid unnecessary crises and clashes with other states, especially nuclear-armed major powers, our government has to begin paying closer attention to what other states say their vital interests are. There needs to be an understanding that the U.S. cannot cajole or sanction them into giving up those interests, and these interests will always matter far more to them than they do to us. Our leaders need to start understanding that and then adjusting our policies accordingly.

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