

The Geopolitics of Empathy

States compete and contend for many reasons, and sometimes those reasons are abundantly clear to the protagonists. But in other cases, the root causes of the disagreement are not well understood, and the level of animosity is greater than it should be. In this latter case, states know they disagree, but they are either confused or mistaken about the underlying source(s) of the problem. In these circumstances, remedying the problem will be much more difficult, and escalatory spirals are more likely.

For this reason, one of the lessons I try hardest to impart in my courses is the importance of empathy; the ability to see problems from another person's (or country's) perspective. To do this does not require agreeing with their view; it is about grasping how others see a situation and understanding why they are acting as they are. The reason to do this is eminently practical: It's harder to persuade a rival to alter its behavior if you don't understand its origins.

I was reminded of this problem when I read several obituaries for Lee Ross, a pioneering social psychologist who taught for many years at Stanford University. Ross is best known for his work on what he called the "fundamental attribution error," which became a core concept in the field and had broad applications. In brief, fundamental attribution error is the human tendency to emphasize "dispositional" explanations of behavior over "situational" explanations. In other words, humans tend to see the behavior of others as reflections of the latter's personality, character, desires, or basic dispositions rather than as response to the situations others are in. Yet we tend to see our own behavior as a response to the circumstances we are facing rather than as being solely a manifestation of "who we are."

If someone lies to us, for example, we tend to assume it is because their character is flawed and they lack integrity. They lied because, well, that's just the kind of person they are.

And sometimes, this is true. But if we tell a lie, we are prone to see it as something we had to do given the situation we were in, not as evidence of our own character flaws. If someone else loses their cool and lashes out, we conclude they must be innately hotheaded or have anger management issues instead of considering whether they are overworked, dealing with three small kids in lockdown, or sleep deprived.

A corollary is the tendency to believe other people have more latitude or control over their actions than we have over ours. We think what we are able to do is heavily constrained by our circumstances but what others do is largely determined by who they are and what they want. It follows that if a problem arises between us, we tend to think they have many more options for resolving it than we do, and therefore, the burden of doing so should fall on them.

As political scientist Robert Jervis made clear in his classic book *Perception and Misperception* in *International Politics*, the insights of Ross and other social psychologists can help us understand why conflict spirals often arise and are so difficult to reverse. If both sides think their rival's actions are internally generated and mostly voluntary while their own actions are defensive, reluctant, and largely a response to external conditions they had little control of, then finding common ground is going to be extremely difficult.

Examples of this bias in the area of foreign policy are ubiquitous. It is a staple of mainstream foreign-policy punditry, which reflexively leaps to explain what states do by focusing on leaders or regime types. Why is Russia interfering in Ukraine? Because Russian President Vladimir Putin is a KGB-trained thug who is obsessed with restoring Russia's status as a great power and seized a fortuitous opportunity. Why is Iran meddling in Iraq, Syria, or Yemen? Because it is led by religious fanatics who are indifferent to human life and eager to export the Iranian model. Why is a ris-

Stephen M. Walt
ing China persecuting Uyghurs, building islands in the South China Sea, and threatening Taiwan? Because Chinese President Xi Jinping is an ambitious leader who wants to go down in history as an even greater visionary leader than late Chinese leader Mao Zedong. And so forth. It's much rarer for pundits to consider whether these admittedly aggressive actions might be defensive responses to events or circumstances these leaders saw (rightly or wrongly) as threatening.

As I noted way back in 2015, Russia's policies in Ukraine are strikingly similar to the Reagan administration's policies toward Nicaragua in the 1980s. In each case, a great power was worried that domestic developments in a nearby country might lead it to realign with its superpower rival, and in each case, it organized and supported a rebel army to challenge the local government. But where Americans saw their policies as a necessity forced on them by circumstance, they saw Putin's actions as purely voluntary, totally unwarranted, and as irrefutable evidence of his problematic character.

When U.S. officials and commentators turn to the United States' conduct, however, they typically see it as driven less by dispositions, desires, or individual personalities as by compelling strategic necessities.

Why does the United States have fleets and troops and air squadrons all over the world, and why does it intervene so often in the domestic affairs of other countries? Not because it wants to do these things—oh no!—it does them because it has "special responsibilities" or because it is facing imminent threats that must be countered. In this view, even recent "wars of choice" were thrust on it by circumstance.

Attribution bias also reinforces the recurring impulse to solve international problems not by diplomacy and compromise but through regime change or other radical steps. If an opponent's worrisome

behavior is dispositional—such as a reflection of who they really are—then it's harder to imagine fixing it as long as the people and institutions responsible for it remain in place. If you really are dealing with a leader or a regime that is compulsively dishonest or irrevocably aggressive, compromise is probably futile and possibly dangerous.

It's a small wonder, then, that preparations for preventive war (such as the 2003 Iraq War) always involve demonizing the enemy as irredeemably evil, untrustworthy, and incapable of change or compromise. And this may not be just part of selling the war; the people doing the demonizing may believe everything they are saying. In this way, overreliance on "dispositional" explanations makes conflicts more intense, harder to resolve, and more prone to violence. Sadly, similar tendencies seem increasingly evident inside the United States as well.

A virtue of foreign-policy realism is it helps the world guard against the types of fundamental attribution errors identified by Ross. Instead of attributing others' behaviors to various "unit-level" characteristics (leaders' personalities, political orders, or whatever), realism emphasizes how the absence of an overarching sovereign authority (like "international anarchy") inclines all states—and especially major powers—to prioritize their own selfish interests, compete with others more-or-less constantly, pursue relative advantages when opportunities arise, and adopt policies others will often find threatening or disturbing.

Instead of dividing the world into good or bad states, status quo powers versus revisionists, or peace-loving leaders and implacable aggressors, realists understand that states and leaders of all types are dealing with an uncertain and insecure world and are likely to do regrettable things in their pursuit of greater security. Realists can be well aware of the motives in others' eyes, but they are less likely to ignore the beam in their own.

This is not to say all conflicts are based on misperceptions and biases or individual traits and impulses do not play important roles in international affairs. Some conflicts of interest may have a completely rational basis—and are all the more tragic for that reason—and protagonists may be under no illusions about how they differ. A individual leader's paranoia, ambitions, or dreams of glory may have profound effects on a state's foreign policy, and ideological visions, domestic factors, or sheer incompetence can play important roles as well. Understanding attribution bias should not lead us to dismiss these other sources of trouble entirely.

But when we are dealing with a vexing international problem, a contentious foe, or a country whose behavior we find troubling or threatening, Ross's core insight reminds us to stop and ask ourselves a few key questions.

First, is our opponent acting as it is because its leaders really want to, or do they think the situation they are in is forcing them to do something they would rather avoid?

Second, if the latter option is a genuine possibility, is it also possible that some of our actions are making the other side's sense of necessity more acute and unintentionally reinforcing the behavior that is bothering us?

Third, if so, are there any steps we could take to ameliorate those concerns—like altering the situational environment our opponent finds itself in—without jeopardizing our own interests?

Reversing an unnecessary spiral will not be possible in every case, but the United States (and others) would be much better off if it devoted more effort to exploring opportunities to resolve disputes through genuine diplomacy instead of blaming all the evils of the world on evildoers who must be eliminated for virtue to triumph. For that core insight, the field of international relations owes the late Ross a considerable intellectual debt. It would be a fitting legacy if it had more influence on the conduct of foreign policy itself.



US shuts down Iranian websites for confronting imperialism & colonialism; Uncle Sam wants you to only watch the news he approves

The US seizure of Iranian-linked websites sends a clear message to the rest of the world – Washington will harass and silence media who dare to challenge the approved narrative.

Richard Medhurst

This week, the United States launched one of the most outrageous attacks on the press and foreign media in recent times.

On June 23, the US government seized the websites of several broadcasters and news outlets, including Iran's Al Alam, Iraq's Alforat, and Yemen's Al Masirah, just to name a few.

Among them was also Iran's Press TV, a popular English-speaking broadcaster where I myself have hosted a television program titled *The Communicé* since late 2020. Anyone attempting to access www.presstv.com is met with a sign that reads "This website has been seized," bearing the daunting seal of the US Department of Justice and Department of Commerce.

The American government didn't just block these outlets inside the US; it blocked them worldwide, for everyone, rendering them inaccessible after seizing their .com domains. An act reminiscent of how the US recently seized (a nice way of saying 'stole') Iran's oil and sold it off, like pirates.

Using emergency laws to silence the media

A statement released the following day by the DOJ confirmed the seizure of not just Press TV, but a total of 33 outlets. What do all these channels have in common? They are Muslim, Arabic, or Persian and tow an anti-imperialist line, part of the Axis of Resistance.

Under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), US President Joe Biden declared a national emergency, designating an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to the "national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States." Apparently, my TV show and those of my colleagues are so upsetting that the US feels compelled to use its emergency laws to silence us for exposing their imperialism.

The DOJ statement claims – absurdly and without proof – that these outlets are "disguised as news" and run by Iran's Quds Force, an elite military unit under the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It was formerly headed by General Qassem Soleimani, assassinated on Trump's order in January 2020.

Once again, we see little to no difference between Trump and Biden, as Biden accuses Iran of "disinformation campaigns," wielding sanctions imposed by Trump on the IRGC and the Islamic Radios and Televisions Union (IRTUV) in October 2020, to seize the sites of several Iranian broadcasters.

Trump was heavily criticized for his "unprecedented" use (and abuse) of emergency powers and executive orders, even declaring a national emergency to secure funding for his border wall. He was dubbed an "existential threat" to the US by Biden, who also lambasted him for his "fall-out assault" on the media.

So where is the accountability for Biden now that he abuses emergency powers to silence the press? I wonder how Biden voters

they confront colonialism, imperialism, and don't parrot the narratives of Western corporate media, nor do they help to sell wars for weapons manufacturers.

The allegations levelled against them by the US, that they spread "disinformation", are no different from the ones that fueled the Russiagate scandal during the last four years – they're unproven and baseless.

By taking down these news sites, the US sends a clear message that it will harass and silence publishers whose work runs counter to their official narrative. Even if you live outside the US, Uncle Sam insists you listen only to news he approves. State media is fine as long as it's American or British, but not Iranian.

This is America's hypocrisy on full display. The US claims to uphold democratic values and traditions. So why is it attacking the press? To call this behavior hypocritical is an understatement. The West constantly points the finger at China and Russia, accusing them of silencing dissidents and journalists.

Almost every day we hear from Western journalists who think they're very tough yelling Navalny's name at Russian President Vladimir Putin – while they say nothing of Julian Assange, journalist and founder of WikiLeaks, whose extradition Biden is still trying to pursue, as he sits in a maximum-security prison in London.

Just imagine if Iran had permanently knocked out CNN, PBS, and MSNBC's websites; imagine the international outrage and backlash that would ensue, with all the usual propaganda about how Iran is a dictatorship and has no respect for the press.

So where is the outrage when the US shuts down 33 foreign news sites? How is it that the United States can get away with such outrageous behavior, purposely seeking out and shutting down outlets abroad, and extra-territorializing its affront on journalists?

The silence from the media is deafening. Many will not speak up, for fear of being associated with Arabic, Persian, and Muslim outlets – or what Israeli media calls "pro-Hamas" outlets. Indeed, it's rather amusing how suddenly all the so-called "leftists" and "free speech advocates" are nowhere to be found. Biden, using emergency powers to designate foreign media as spies and military units, terminating them in the name of counterterrorism, doesn't seem to bother them. Once again, when it's crunch time, you see where some people really stand on imperialism, and for many, it's by Uncle Sam's side.

Indeed, the agents of the empire take adversarial journalism and political commentary seriously. If they didn't, they wouldn't bother going to such lengths to silence truth tellers. If the US president uses emergency powers, under which our work is labeled an "unusual and extraordinary threat," then this not only proves that we're right on the criminality of US imperialism – but that we're also an effective thorn in the empire's side.

If our journalism and exposure of the truth poses an "unusual and extraordinary threat" and the agents of empire label us as such, then this is a label we shall wear with pride.

This latest action by the Biden administration is very clearly an attack on the foreign press. The US specifically sought out anti-imperialist news outlets and shut them down. All these outlets are based in countries that form part of the Axis of Resistance and expose the true nature of US foreign policy. They tell the truth about Western imperialism; how America's sanctions are akin to siege warfare, producing mass starvation, death, and suffering. They expose the crimes of the Israeli occupation, and don't sugarcoat the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians as "clashes" or a "conflict."

Joe Biden wants to show his Western allies who's boss

We had mentioned that U.S. President Joe Biden's approach toward his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at the Geneva Summit had been met with ire in both Washington and the anti-Russian hawks in Europe. Biden had tried to defend his approach by saying that the purpose of the summit was to maintain a stable and predictable relationship with Moscow. In line with the decisions at the summit, the U.S.'s ambassador to Russia returned to Moscow, and Russia's ambassador to the U.S. trotted back to Washington. However, eastern and central European countries at loggerheads with Russia, particularly Ukraine and Poland, are indignant that Joe Biden rewarded Putin.

now both NATO and EU members. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria were also members of the Warsaw Pact established by the Soviet Union against NATO. These countries, which are former satellites of Moscow, are also members of the EU and NATO. The fact that these countries joined NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union has always been a sore spot for Russia.

After Biden's alleged treachery, the second blow to eastern and central European countries came from France and Germany. These countries now want the EU to hold a summit with Putin. This suggestion is particularly bugging the countries with a Russian phobia, namely Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. These countries do not take kindly to attempts by the EU or the U.S. to establish a dialogue with Putin without a positive change in Russia's behavior.

Abdullah Muradoglu

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, making a clear reference to Paris and Berlin, said: "We all agreed that Russia is a big threat. I'm really keen to listen to the colleague's argumentation. I personally think it's not the time to have such summits." She added that she could not comprehend the sharp swerve in the attitude of Paris and Berlin toward Russia. Likewise, according to the Latvian administration, the "Russia Summit" suggested by Germany and France offers Putin an unrequited concession.

Just like in the Cold War era, in a world which is being divided into new borders, the U.S. wants to show its Western allies that the real boss here is Washington. However, France and Germany strictly object. French President Emmanuel Macron said: NATO is an organization concerning the Northern Atlantic. China is

not in the North Atlantic. Macron also highlighted that relations with China should not be based on biases. Germany and France do not want to view Russia and China from the window of the U.S. Both countries seemed determined to talk to Putin directly, and not through Washington. Merkel may have quit the leadership of the Christian Democrat Party, but her views are prevalent. The party's new leader, Armin Laschet announced that he would follow in his predecessor's footsteps.

On the other hand, France and Germany's pursuit for an alternative military structure independent from NATO to ensure Europe's security is giving the U.S. a stomachache.

Both Democrats and Republicans are balking at Europe's pursuit for defense outside of NATO. This debate isn't something new. In October 2003, the U.S.'s NATO Ambassador Nicholas Burns

branded the EU's development plan for an independent military capacity as one of the biggest threats for the "Transatlantic community." Former U.S. President Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton, a known neon, described the EU's quest for autonomy for European defense as a dagger stuck in the heart of NATO. The U.S. and France and Germany, the two leader countries of the EU, want bygones to be bygones and to reset relations with Russia to kickstart a new era in ties with Moscow. Both parties want the same thing, but for different reasons. However, the search for new relations with Russia has led to fierce debates, both in the U.S. and in Europe. With the exception of Hungary, there is a serious rift between the Eastern and Central European countries and the Western European countries led by France and Germany concerning "European defense and Russia."

How cooperation among China, Russia and Iran will be updated under Raisi era

Ebrahim Raisi has won Iran's presidential election, as expected. Educated in the seminary, Raisi has served in several positions in Iran's judicial system. He ascended from chief justice to president and is likely to be the next supreme leader. His life experience features both hard line and Shia clerics.

someone, as the president of America, who appeared as a murderer or ordered a murder, may be immune from justice being carried out. Never," said Raisi, adding, "those who had a role in this assassination and crime will not be safe on Earth."

Secondly, Raisi will attach great importance to strengthening security cooperation and religious ties with Islamic countries, and pay close attention to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Regardless of his hard line, Raisi's top priority is to address livelihood problems caused by the US sanctions. Although Raisi is talking tough, rejecting the possibility of meeting with US President Joe Biden, this does not mean Raisi's government will take a radical confrontational policy against the US. After Raisi's new government formally takes office, hardliners in Iran are likely to promote a new nuclear agreement, which will be helpful for improving Iran's economy.

Niu Song

Raisi will be formally inaugurated as Iran's president on August 3, when the US-Iran relationship might witness many possibilities. On the whole, whether the Raisi administration admits it or not, Washington will remain an important and even the primary factor affecting Iran's domestic and diplomatic interests.

Some analysts argue that Raisi will center his foreign policy on the "Look East" strategy, which means closer cooperation with China and Russia after he takes office. The advancement of Iran-China relations and Iran-Russia relations has always been supported by the supreme leader Khamenei. The Raisi administration will continue the existing cooperation framework and mechanisms with China and Russia. Iran's relations with China and Russia are hopeful to enjoy development in the following two fields.

First, China and Russia are likely to take further

active steps on the Iranian nuclear deal, especially by hosting events to address relevant problems. Raisi will continue to emphasize the roles of China and Russia in helping restore the nuclear deal.

Second, China and Russia may, within the framework of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), further exert the positive influence of Islamic factors on the trilateral relations between China, Russia and Iran.

Raisi is not only the next president, but also the possible supreme leader. The Islamic factor will be an important ideological foundation for his foreign policy. On June 13, China's first-appointed representative to the OIC submitted his appointment letter to the secretary-general of the organization, which marked the establishment of China's institutional links with the organization. Besides, Russia is an observer country of the OIC. This provides a new opportunity for China and

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