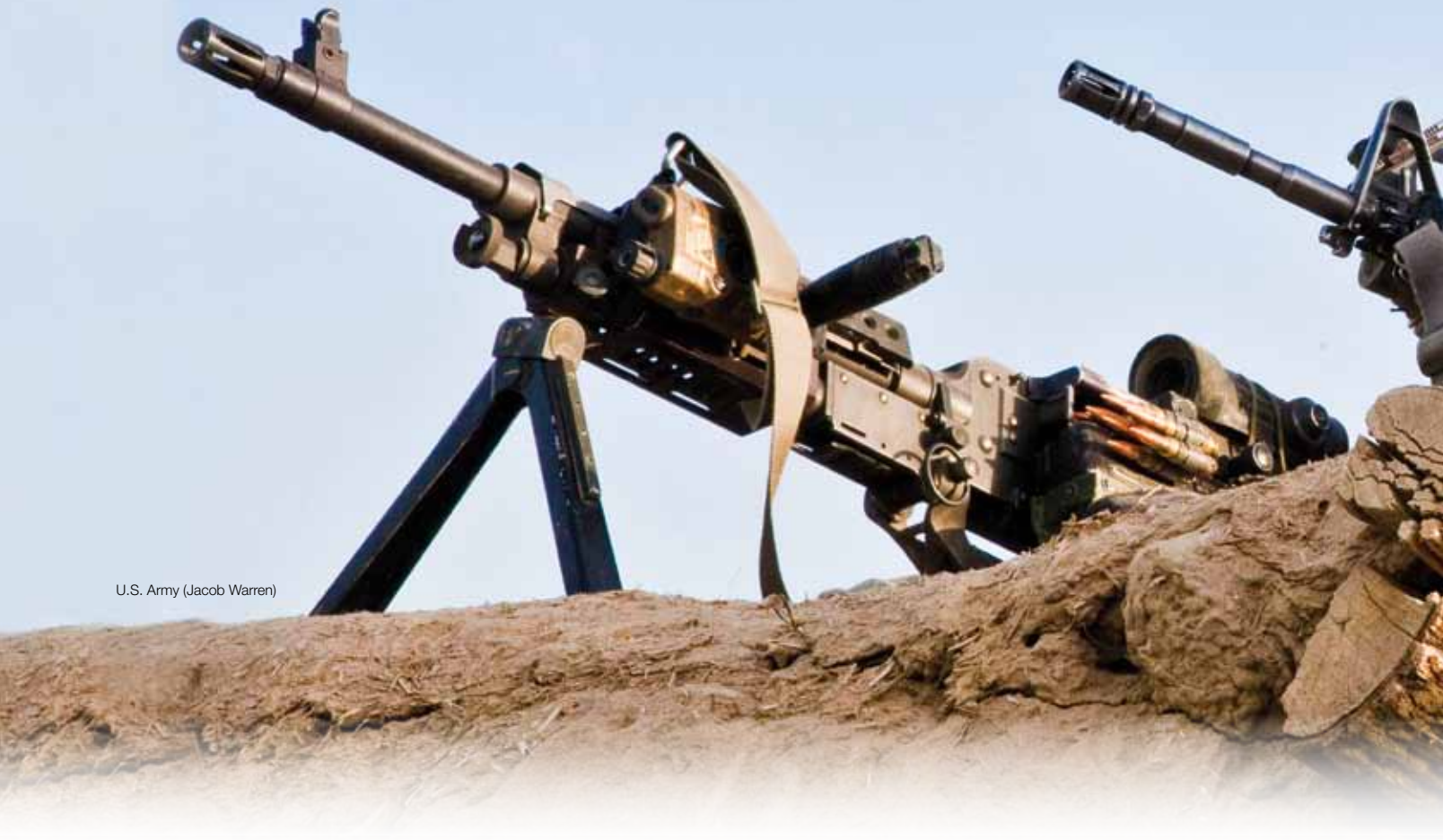
A Sense of the Enemy

Refocusing Prediction in Military and Foreign Affairs

By ZACHARY SHORE



U.S. Army (Jacob Warren)

No one knows precisely how Hans Lippershey came upon the invention. One legend holds that some children wandered into his spectacle shop, began playing with the lenses on display, and suddenly started to laugh. Tiny objects far away appeared as though they were right in front of them. The miniscule had become gigantic. Though the truth of that tale is doubtful, the story of the telescope's invention remains a mystery. We know only that four centuries ago, on October 2, 1608, Hans Lippershey received a patent for a device that is still recognizable as a modern refractory telescope.

Not long after Lippershey's patent, the device found its way to Pisa, Italy, where it was offered to the Duchy for sale. Catching wind of this new invention, Galileo Galilei quickly obtained one of the instruments, dissected its construction, and redesigned it to his liking.[1] Galilei intended it, of course, for star gazing, but his loftier intentions were not shared by the Pisans. This new tool had immediate and obvious military applications. Any commander who could see enemy ships at great distances or opposing armies across battlefields would instantly gain a distinct advantage. That commander would, in effect, be looking forward in time. And with that

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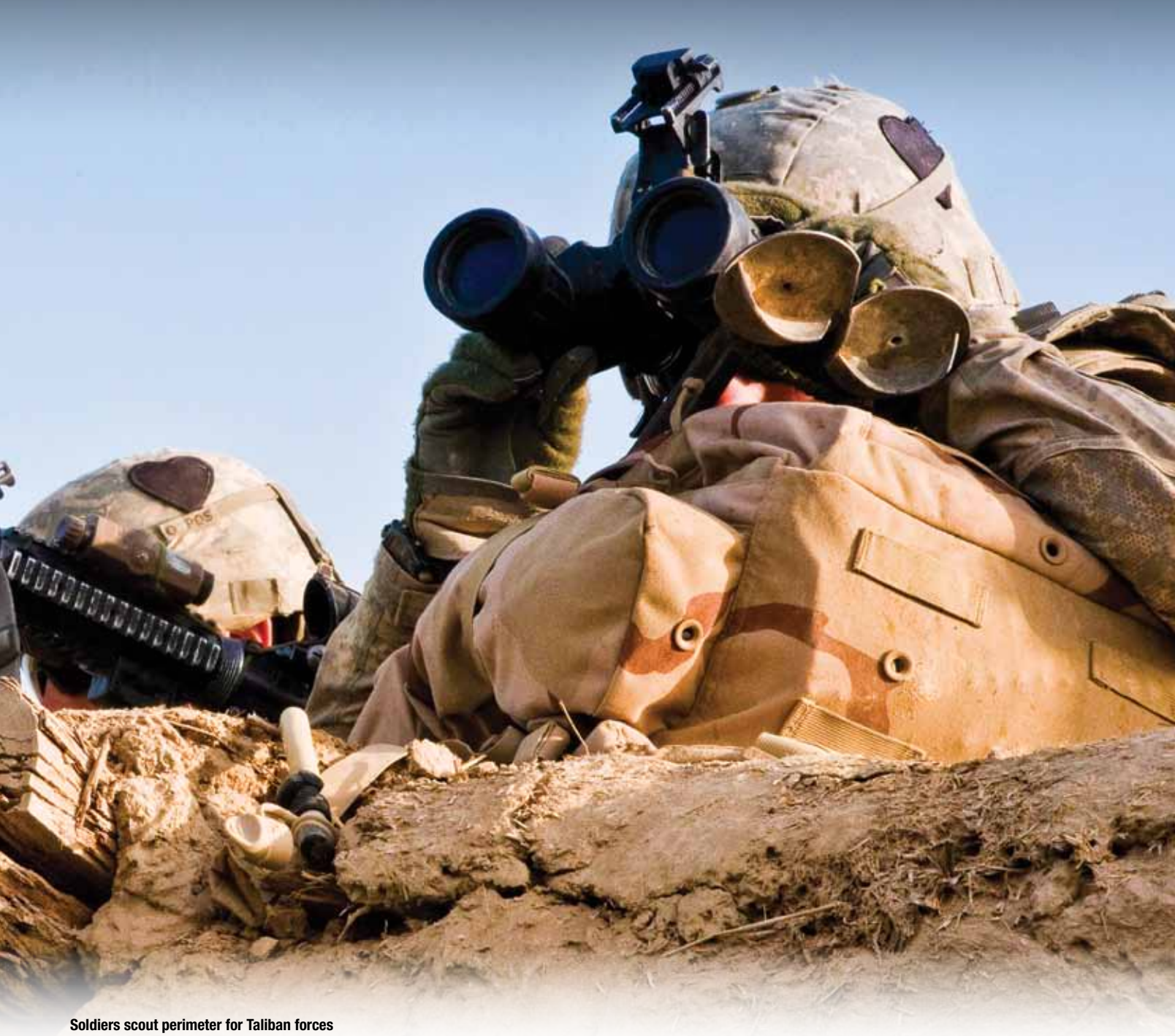

Soldiers scout perimeter for Taliban forces

literal foresight, he could predict aspects of the enemy's actions.

The telescope offered its owner a previously unimaginable advantage in battle. It brought the invisible to light. It altered the perception of time. It presented a genuine glimpse into the future, beyond what the naked eye could see. We don't know whether Lippershey, Galilei, or some other crafty inventor made the first telescope sale to a military, but when he did, that exchange represented one of the earliest mergers of enlightenment science with the business of war. From that moment on, modern science has been searching for ways to extend that glimpse into the future, and militaries have been eager to pay for it.

In the 17th century, merely gaining an early glimpse of the enemy's actions was enough to advantage one side over the other. By the 20th century, strategists sought much more. They needed greater predictive power for anticipating enemy moves. Technology alone could not, and still cannot, fill that gap. Strategists have always needed to develop a sense of the enemy, but the craving for more concrete, reliable predictions has also made militaries easily seduced by science. Lately, that longing has led them to focus on the wrong objective: predicting the unpredictable.

Number Worship

Predictions in military and foreign affairs fall broadly into two types. They focus either on large-scale societal transformations or the actions of individuals. The recent uprisings

across the Arab Middle East, just as with the Soviet Union's collapse, demonstrated yet again how unlikely it is to foresee such macro-level changes. At best, we can assess when societies are at risk, but predicting revolutions remains the stuff that dreams are made of. Yet it is a dream that will not die. The Central Intelligence Agency continues to invest in a Political Instability Task Force, which might identify the correlates of instability but cannot provide the kind of early warnings that politicians crave. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency tried to launch a political futures market back in 2003, but had to scrap it when the public disapproved. It seemed somehow unsavory to be betting on upheavals. Though private futures markets have been thriving, they, too, failed to presage the latest spate of Arab revolts.

In response to many failings, behavioral scientists have been shattering crystal balls. The Berkeley scholar Philip Tetlock has been widely cited for revealing that the more renowned the expert, the more likely his predictions will be false.[2] The Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert tells us that we cannot even predict what will bring us joy since our expectations are almost always off.[3] And the gleefully irreverent market trader Nassim Taleb argues that the massive impact of *black swans*—improbable but surprisingly frequent anomalies—makes any effort at prediction fruitless.[4] Most notable of all, the economist Dan Ariely has exposed the flawed models for predicting our behavior in everything from the products we buy to the daily choices we make.[5] Of course, they are all right. We are abysmal at prediction. But the skeptics have missed a crucial point: we have no other choice.

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Large-scale predictions will continue because they must. Governments and militaries cannot function without them.[6] And leaders will continue to be frustrated by their performance. In contrast, predicting individual actions—gaining a sense of the enemy—is a skill that can be developed and improved.

For better or worse, this sense of the enemy can only be partly aided by science. Simulation games, such as Gemstone, can be useful in shifting leaders' thoughts toward cultural perceptions of military actions, but as with all algorithm-based models, they are limited by their rigid information inputs.[7] Despite this ineluctable fact, quantifying human behavior remains in vogue. Frequently funded by the Defense Department, political scientist Bruce Bueno de Mesquita insists that foreign affairs can be predicted with 90 percent accuracy using his own secret formula. Of course, most of his 90 percent accuracy likely comes from predictions that present trends will continue—which typically they do.

The crux of Bueno de Mesquita's model rests largely on the inputs to his algorithm. He says that in order to predict what people are likely to do, we must first approximate what they believe about a situation and what outcomes they desire. He insists that most of the information we need to assess their motives is already available through open sources. Classified data are rarely necessary. On at least this score, he is probably correct. Though skillful intelligence can garner some true gems of enemy intentions, most of the time neither the quantity nor the secrecy of information is what matters most in predicting individual behavior. What is important is the relevant information and the capacity to analyze it.

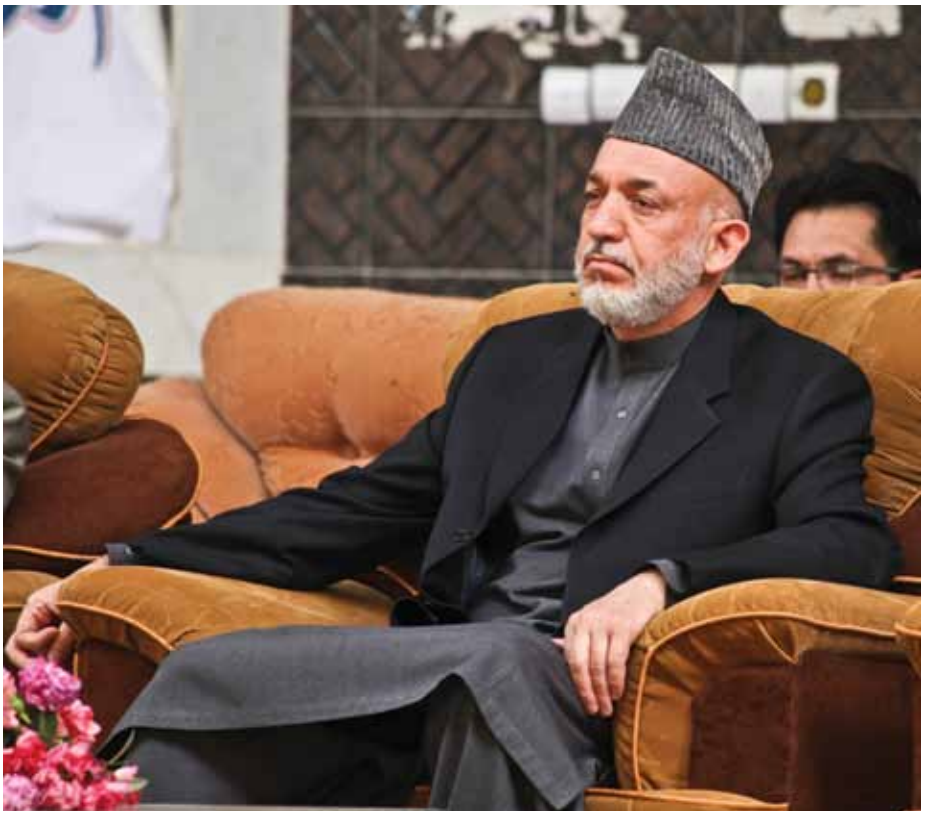
The crucial problem with Bueno de Mesquita's approach is its reliance on consistently accurate, quantifiable assessments of individuals. A model will be as weak as its inputs. If the inputs are off, the output must be off—and sometimes dramatically so, as Bueno de Mesquita is quick to note on his own Website: "Garbage in, garbage out." Yet this awareness does not dissuade him from some remarkable assertions. Take for example the assessments of Adolf Hitler before he came to power. Bueno de Mesquita spends one section of his book *The Predictioneer's Game* explaining how, if politicians in 1930s Germany had had access to his mathematical model, the Socialists and Communists would have seen the necessity of cooperating with each other and with the Catholic Center Party as the only means of preventing Hitler's accession to Chancellor.[8] He assumes that Hitler's opponents could easily have recognized Hitler's intentions. He further assumes that the Catholic Center Party could have been persuaded to align against the Nazis, an assumption that looks much more plausible in a post–World War II world. In 1932, the various party leaders were surely not envisioning the future as it actually unfolded. Their actions at the time seemed the best choice in a bad situation. No mathematical model of the future would likely have convinced them otherwise. Assessments are only as good as the assessors, and quantifying bad assessments will yield useless if not disastrous results.

None of this means that all efforts at prediction are pure folly. Bueno de Mesquita's larger aim is worthy: to devise more rigorous methods of foreseeing behavior. An alternative approach to his quantitative metrics is to develop our sense for how the enemy behaves. Though less scientific, it could be far more profitable, and it is clearly very much in need.

Sense and Sensible Solutions

More than two millennia ago, Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu advised generals to know their enemy. The question has always been how. Writing in 1996 in the *New York Review of Books*, philosopher Isaiah Berlin argued that political genius—the ability to synthesize "the fleeting, broken, infinitely various wisps and fragments that make up life at any level"—is simply a sense—you either have it or you do not. But what if Berlin was wrong? What if that sense could actually be learned and improved?

That sense of the enemy could have been of use in 2010, when, hoping to induce the Afghan insurgents into peace talks, U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) officials paid an undisclosed and hefty sum to Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour for his participation, at one point flying the Taliban's second-in-command to meet with President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. Unfortunately, the Taliban commander was a fake, a shopkeeper from Quetta, Pakistan.[9] The episode showed how poorly the United States knows its enemy in this ongoing war. On one level, U.S. and NATO officials could not even identify the number-two man in their opponent's organization. On the more strategic level, they could not recognize that throughout three separate meetings, the impostor never once requested that foreign troops withdraw from Afghan soil—a staple of Taliban demands.



U.S. Marine Corps (Mallory VanderSchans)

Afghan President Hamid Karzai

What U.S. and NATO negotiators needed was *strategic empathy*: a sharpened sensitivity to their enemy's underlying drivers and constraints. For much of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, it seems that the Afghans have possessed a greater degree of strategic empathy for the Americans than the other way round. It is this crucial weakness that needs to change, and it will not come through complex algorithms or high-tech tricks.

Strategic empathy is the ability to think like your enemy. It is the skill of stepping out of our minds and into the heads of others. It is what allows us to pinpoint what truly drives and constrains the other side. The best strategic empaths can achieve a good, though certainly never foolproof, ability to predict the actions of others—individuals or small groups. Unlike stereotypes—which reduce others to broad, simplistic categories in order to assess their nature and predict their actions—strategic empathy identifies what is unique both in individuals and their context. One of its keys lies in determining which information is most crucial to observe.

Knowing how another thinks depends initially on gathering and analyzing information. Most leaders use the *great mass* approach. They gather up as much data as they can. The problem, of course, is that it is too easy to drown in an ocean of noise. In a recent *Armed Forces Journal* article, Colonels Kevin Benson and Steven Rotkoff noted the idea that "there are specific knowable causes that are linked to corresponding effects dominates military thinking and manifests in our drive to gather as much information as possible before acting." Determining which data matter and connecting the dots then grows even harder. In contrast to the great mass approach, others believe that a "thin slice" of information is more effective at reducing noise and revealing someone's true nature. The obvious danger is that we often choose the wrong slice, as author Malcolm Gladwell graphically showed in *Blink*.[10] The conclusion here is inescapable: the quantity of information is irrelevant; it is the relevance of any quantity that matters. The key is not to collect a great mass or a thin slice, but the right chunk. The challenge that has long bedeviled analysts and statesmen alike is to find heuristics—shortcuts—to help them locate the right chunk in any given context. Psychologists point to a wide range of cognitive biases that lead us astray from finding and correctly interpreting the right chunks. The knack for avoiding these cognition traps is the "sense" to which Sun Tzu and Isaiah Berlin allude.

Fostering a sense of the enemy typically involves gathering information specifically on intentions and capabilities. By examining these two elements of power, the experts believe they can comprehend or even anticipate the adversary's behavior. This categorization is, however, far too narrow. A more inclusive categorization focuses on drivers and constraints.

This first step in strategic empathy has nothing mysterious about it. Instead, it involves a cold assessment of strategic constraints. We look first not at what the other side might *want* to do but what it is *able* to do based on context. Capabilities are not constraints. *Capabilities* are what enable us to achieve our wants, but *constraints* are what render those capabilities useless. International relations experts too often think about capabilities in mainly military terms. They count missiles and tanks, factor in firepower, and dissect strategic doctrine for clues to enemy intentions. If China builds an aircraft carrier today, it must be planning to challenge America on the high seas. But military capabilities, like intentions, are often constrained by nonmilitary factors, such as financial, political, organizational, environmental, or cultural impediments to action. Even something as ineffable as the *Zeitgeist* can be a powerful constraint, as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi recently discovered. Strategic empaths seek out the less obvious, underlying constraints on their enemy's behavior as well as their own.

Once the underlying constraints are understood and it is clear that the enemy actually has room to maneuver, strategic empaths turn to exploring the enemy's key drivers. Again, we must distinguish between intentions and drivers. If *intentions* are the things we want to do, *drivers* are what shape those wants. We can be driven by an ideological worldview, such as communist, capitalist, or racialist dogma. We can be driven by psychological make-ups, with all the myriad complexes and schemas they entail. Or we could be driven by religious and cultural imperatives: conquer the infidels; convert the heathens; or Russify, Francofy, or democratize the other.

Political scientists have produced a vast literature on enemy intentions. Each scholar offers an ever more nuanced explication of how states signal their intentions and how other states perceive them. Yet intentions are only fully anticipated when the underlying drivers are clearly understood. In an ideal

case, strategic empaths would not bother to assess intentions without first divining drivers. In reality, of course, most statesmen cannot first determine constraints and then turn to drivers. Typically that analysis occurs in tandem, or in whichever order circumstances allow.

From wargames with red teams to scenarios and software programs, militaries employ a variety of methods for thinking like the enemy. Though these approaches can be helpful, they often lack a truly imaginative spark. They are either grounded in social science theories, which themselves may be of limited reliability, or they draw on the perspectives of those steeped in the American military culture. One less-frequented avenue is to recruit the experts in understanding what drives characters to act. Successful novelists, among others in the arts and humanities, devote themselves to putting themselves into others' heads. They concentrate on boring down to a character's essence, stripping away pretext to uncover deep-seated motivations. And they typically achieve this without relying on the latest trend in psychological, sociological, or other social science theories. Instead, they do it the old-fashioned way—through incisive observation and thoughtful analysis of what makes different people tick.

Rather than diverting labor hours, energy, and brain power—not to mention money—to speculating on the unknowable, analysts should instead be concentrating on developing their sense of the enemy as individuals. In recent years, the U.S. military has been turning to outside sources for their insights into enemy intentions. It has increasingly employed the skills of social scientists, particularly anthropologists, to help it traverse complex cultural terrain. It is time now to enlist the aid of more experts in the arts when seeking foresight into others' actions. To take one example, successful novelists are highly astute at developing strategic empathy for another's character. They devote themselves to identifying someone's less obvious drivers and constraints. Likewise, the best actors must learn to get inside another's head, penetrating to the core of a character's deepest wants and fears. We do not need an army of Hollywood guilds. What we need is to learn the skills that good fiction writers, actors, and others in the arts and humanities have developed when thinking about what makes a human being tick.

Militaries, by nature, crave metrics and checklists. If it smells too artsy, they think it has no use. This attitude can only act to their detriment, especially for the U.S. military, which finds itself increasingly at odds not only with cultures that are possessed of dramatically divergent perspectives from their own, but also with individuals. The average American Soldier cannot be expected to land in Fallujah or the Korangal Valley and suddenly possess a deep appreciation for what the locals truly want. It is instead the responsibility of strategic planners to seek out all reasonable means of knowing the people—and the persons—with whom that Soldier engages.

U.S. Navy (Tyler J. Wilson)

Navy, Air Force, and Air National Guard staff members participate in fleet synthetic training in Virginia Beach

In addition to exploring how the arts and humanities develop a sense for others' key drivers, we could also profit from more in-depth studies of historical figures who have successfully managed to do so. Isaiah Berlin's dismissal notwithstanding, there may be much to glean from past strategic empaths, not least being some clues for how they achieved their skill. I suspect we might find at least two traits. First, rather than synthesizing vast amounts of information, the best strategic empaths learned how to filter out the ocean of noise and identify the right chunks of data. Second, instead of straining to see patterns in enemy behavior, they focused on the pattern breaks. This means that they, unlike their peers, already had a general sense of the patterns and could quickly spot the breaks. Anyone who ever received a call from a credit card company alerting him to unusual activity on his account knows that MasterCard and Visa employ sophisticated algorithms to identify purchasing patterns and sudden deviations. This is a realm in which computers provide enormous added value. But in the realms where human behavior is less amenable to quantification, we must supplement number crunching with an old-fashioned people sense. It is here that historical records might contain an untapped trove.

The ability to get out of our own minds and into the heads of others is one of the oldest challenges we face. It is tough enough to do it with people we know well. Attempting it with those from foreign cultures is immeasurably harder. It should be obvious that even small-scale, individual actions can never be perfectly anticipated since so much of human behavior rests upon contingencies and chance. That said, we can still enhance our strategic empathy by retraining ourselves to approach prediction differently. We will never find the Maltese Falcon of grand societal predictions. But we can improve our predictions of individual and small group behavior. Even a modest refinement in our ability to think like others could have substantial payoffs both in winning wars and, more crucially, in sustaining the peace. JFQ

NOTES

[1] For more on the telescope, see Geoff Andersen, *The Telescope: Its History, Technology, and Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) and Mario Biagioli, *Galileo's Instruments of Credit: Telescopes, Images, Secrecy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[2] Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[3] Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

[4] Nassim Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

[5] Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (New York: Harper, 2009).

[6] One recent study of military planning calls for the creation of more flexible, adaptable weapons systems in order to account for our inevitable failure to predict. See Richard Danzig, *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions About Prediction and National Security* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, October 2011).

[7] For more on Gemstone, see Michael Peck, "Firmer Ground: How the U.S. Army is teaching tough-to-simulate COIN and irregular warfare," *Training and Simulation Journal*, October 1, 2011.

[8] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The Predictioneer's Game: Using the Logic of Brazen Self-Interest to See and Shape the Future* (New York: Random House, 2010).

[9] See Dexter Filkins and Carlotta Gall, "Taliban Leader in Secret Talks Was an Impostor," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2010. See also Joshua Partlow, "British faulted for Taliban impostor," *The Washington Post*, November 26, 2010.

[10] Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007).