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Misreading the Enemy

Christopher J. Fettweis

In Russia's strongman president, Chinese autocrats and Iranian clerics, Western leaders face an age-old problem, one that has vexed nearly every leader throughout history: seemingly inscrutable rivals. How much of what others say is the truth, and how much is designed to hide a broader agenda? Can they be trusted? Since leaders never really know just how much danger they face – or where to draw the line between prudence and paranoia – they tend to err on the side of caution. The tendency to assume the worst in others seems to be the rule, rather than the exception, in international politics.

During the Cold War, political scientists and psychologists devoted a good deal of time to describing the effects of negative assumptions, or the 'enemy image', on decision-making.¹ International politics breeds suspicion; it is somewhat natural for leaders to reject the simplest explanations for the actions of others as long as other, more nefarious motivations cannot be ruled out. Once established, enemy images are very difficult to change, since they filter and shape the perception of new information. They become self-fulfilling, poisoning relations and sometimes lead to unnecessary, unwanted conflict.²

The pace of scholarship on this pernicious form of misperception slowed considerably after the collapse of the Soviet Union, perhaps because the urgency of the need to understand its effects decreased alongside the risk of nuclear war. Although academic interest in the enemy image may have

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waned, however, the prevalence of the misperception has not. Post-Cold War Western leaders have proven no less susceptible to negative images than their predecessors. Serious observers are beginning to warn of the dangers of unwanted or accidental war with Russia, and with China over the South China Sea.³ Others worry that war with Iran will follow if the nuclear deal falls through, or if a new US president annuls it, as some 2016 presidential candidates have promised to do. If there were a way that policymakers could determine when pathological images of the enemy were obscuring their perceptions, exaggerating the belligerence of other states and making unnecessary conflict more likely, decision-making would improve immeasurably. The next major national blunder might even be avoided.

Fortunately, the enemy image produces very clear symptoms in its hosts. During the Cold War the superpowers displayed a consistent pattern of mistaken beliefs that can be whittled down to a virtual checklist for misperception. Were policymakers to become familiar with these indicators, they might be able to improve the accuracy of their perceptions. Misperceptions are like mirages: once they are recognised, it is difficult to see reality in quite the same way again.⁴

Image problem

Enemy images are not always irrational. Rivals do exist, some of whom work hard to undermine the interests of their opponents. There is equal danger in over- and underestimating the belligerence of rivals. Misperception in either direction can lead to national disaster, to either Pearl Harbor or Iraq. Leaders wrongly holding an unjustified 'inherent good-faith' image of others can be in for unpleasant surprises, as Stalin found out in 1940 when Hitler's tanks rolled into a stubbornly unprepared Soviet Union. The next year, Japanese bombers informed US president Franklin Roosevelt that he had been underestimating threats in the Pacific.⁵

Few things are more important for national leaders, therefore, than accurate perception of the intentions of others. While unverified trust is rarely prudent, neither is constant worst-case-scenario planning, since that can also lead to counterproductive policies. Actions made to maximise safety can waste resources and bring about the outcomes they hope to prevent.

Although the 'amount and quality of self-conscious judgment employed in decision-making can be increased', Robert Jervis wrote in 1976, 'no formula will eliminate misperception or reveal which image is correct'.⁶ Perhaps not, but we may be able to approach such a formula in an indirect way, by identifying common indicators of pathological images, in the hopes of creating a soft metric for more systematic evaluation. Leaders may not find it possible to eliminate the enemy image, but they can certainly take steps to recognise its presence and minimise its effects. The misperception of enemies, whether international, domestic or interpersonal, tends to follow an established pattern and generate recognisable indicators. Each, individually, can of course be accurate. But when enough appear together, then there is a high chance that the enemy image is at work, and the hostility of rivals is being overestimated.

Our differences are fundamental and 'existential'; they do not value human life

The most basic indicator of the presence of the enemy image is the belief that the other is different from us in fundamental and profound ways. Since we are good and trustworthy, it follows that those who are different may well be the opposite. The enemy's nurture – historical memory, ideology, culture and religion – outweighs our common human nature, creating mutually incomprehensible world views. What we think is basic to rationality, morality and humanity simply might not apply to them. Our differences are existential (which in popular discourse has come to mean 'irreconcilable' rather than the more traditional 'threatening the existence of'), and as a result the enemy hates us for who we are, not what we do. Enemies do not evolve, at least not in important ways; their nature, born of innate, immutable national characteristics (and flaws), is permanent.

One enduring reflection of these fundamental differences concerns the relative value the enemy places on life itself. The people of the East, the American people were told from the Second World War through to the war in Vietnam, simply did not place the same value on human life as did those in the West. Now such accusations are more commonly levelled at the Muslim world, from Afghanistan to Gaza, where suicide bombers are taken as evidence that 'they' simply do not care about life to the same extent that

we do. At the same time, in many parts of the world, NATO's willingness to drop bombs from the sky is seen as evidence that its leaders place insufficient value on human life.⁷

The enemy's cavalier attitude toward humanity extends even to extinction. Deterrence cannot be counted on to work, because enemy leaders do not necessarily fear nuclear war, and may even initiate one. During the Cold War, a variety of analysts argued that the Kremlin did not share Western ideas of deterrence and felt that a nuclear war could have been fought and won.⁸ Anyone who attributed basic rationality to Soviet leaders engaged in naïve 'mirror imaging', or the mistaken assumption that they were essentially like us.⁹ Former US secretary of defense Casper Weinberger, for example, believed that enormous suffering at the hands of the Wehrmacht had hardened Soviet leaders to the suffering of major war. He consistently argued that NATO faced an adversary who did not share its abhorrence of war, even the nuclear variety.¹⁰ The Soviet civil-defence programme and force structure likewise caused many observers to doubt that Moscow feared mutual destruction at all.¹¹ At the same time, the Soviets worried that Washington might believe it could fight and win a nuclear exchange. Weinberger made occasional jokes about this, which were broadly misinterpreted in Moscow. So too was a widely circulated comment by a Reagan administration official that all the United States had to do to win a nuclear war was build enough bomb shelters.¹² We know now that deterrence worked in similar ways on both sides.¹³

To some observers, post-Cold War enemies of the West appear equally undeterrable. Since rogue states are inherently unmoved by fear of retaliation, they cannot be expected to act rationally. The enmity that Iranians feel toward the United States and Israel is so great that it may well outweigh their desire to live, which is why the regime might well use any nuclear weapons it develops. Leaders in Tehran might prove sufficiently irrational to bring down their civilisation in a blaze of suicidal glory, unleashing a religiously inspired doomsday plan that would pit their one or two weapons against states that have hundreds.¹⁴ When leaders begin to believe that their enemies are unable to recognise the most basic tenets of rationality, misperception is likely at work.

Religious differences make fertile ground for the growth of the enemy image. It is easy for us to accept the notion that their faith – or lack of it – has conditioned them to be fundamentally different. ‘Soviet Communism starts with an atheistic, Godless premise’, believed Eisenhower’s secretary of state John Foster Dulles. ‘Everything flows from that premise.’¹⁵ The apparent fanaticism of Iran’s Shia clerics might affect their views on an apocalyptic showdown with the West. ‘With these people’s apocalyptic mindset, mutual assured destruction is not a deterrent, it is an inducement’, wrote the influential Princeton historian Bernard Lewis. ‘It is a quick free pass for the true believers to heaven and its delights and dispatch of the rest to hell.’¹⁶ States with higher levels of religiosity are more likely to identify enemies across the various fault lines of faith. When two exceptionally religious countries find themselves on opposite sides of issues, as have today’s United States and Iran, spirals of misperception are quite likely.

Their word cannot be trusted; negotiations are a waste of time

Shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviets made a series of proposals designed to cool superpower tensions. To Marine commandant General David Shoup, however, there was little reason to believe anything the Soviets said. ‘It’s hard for me to believe’, said the general, who was a member of Kennedy’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, ‘that their philosophy of lying would be subject to any sudden reversal to a philosophy of telling the truth.’ The rest of the administration apparently agreed, citing as evidence the lies that Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko had told the president during the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹⁷ The word of the United States was trustworthy, on the other hand, despite the fact that the previous few years had seen a steady stream of lies emanate from the White House regarding the U-2 affair, bungled attempts to assassinate Castro, the Bay of Pigs and other misadventures. Leaders lie all the time in international politics.¹⁸ The main difference between our lies and theirs is that we remember theirs, believing that they reflect our rival’s true character. Ours are unfortunate reactions to particular situations, always understandable in context and certainly not indicative of who we really are.

It nearly goes without saying that there is little reason to negotiate with such untrustworthy actors. Diplomatic overtures to enemies are not only pointless but dangerous, since they can lull us into a false sense of security while having little effect on their overall hostility and perfidy. Enemies cannot be expected to honour commitments made at the negotiating table. When the US began arms-control discussions in earnest with the Soviets, the enemy image fuelled American doubts. 'When we sit down to negotiate with the Soviets we negotiate for peace,' argued Weinberger, 'they negotiate for victory.'¹⁹ Harvard historian Richard Pipes explained to the many leaders he advised that the Soviets viewed arms control as a tactic to restrain, and ultimately divide, the West.²⁰ To enemies, negotiations are just another weapon in the endless struggle against us.

The same distrust has accompanied the bargaining with Iran over its nuclear-weapons programme. One of the consistent themes of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to the US Congress in 2015 was that since Iran could not be trusted, virtually any deal would by definition be a bad deal. Forty-seven Republican senators agreed, and followed up the speech with an open letter to the Iranian leadership designed to scuttle the talks. On the other side, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei reportedly told his diplomats that 'you are fools if you think the Americans will live up to anything they promise'.²¹ We bargain in good faith; they do not. Nothing they say can be believed, because their words are unrelated to their intentions.

Their regime is simultaneously dangerous and essentially fragile

Leaders under the spell of the enemy image are predisposed to believe that populations in rival states do not support their government. Our disagreement is with the enemy regime, not its people, whom we know are basically good and more or less like us.²² Their government, therefore, is much weaker than it appears. Political psychologist Ralph White observed that 'nations tend to overestimate the insurrectionary possibilities (with implied friendliness toward themselves) in countries whose governments they strongly dislike', citing as examples America's confidence in revolution in Cuba, and the Soviet Union's similar outlook for the capitalist world in its early years.²³

Later, US policymakers were convinced that their troops would be greeted as liberators in Iraq, and that the Iranian people would welcome the overthrow of their government.²⁴

At the heart of the inherent-bad-faith image, therefore, lies a paradox: evil regimes are simultaneously terrifyingly powerful and essentially fragile. No matter how evil they may be, with the right amount of effort on our part they can certainly be overcome. Indeed it probably would not take much to topple the enemy regime, since its legitimacy is built on sand. The two parts of the paradox are directly related; the greater the evil, the stronger its inherent vulnerability. Dulles saw signs everywhere of the Soviet Union's internal weakness, and felt that it was perpetually on the verge of collapse.²⁵ Former Reagan administration official Michael Ledeen has argued for three decades that while the government in Iran represents an existential threat to the United States, overthrowing it would be a simple affair.²⁶

The internally weak enemy is thought to be vulnerable to the external application or threat of force. Throughout the Cold War, many analysts remained sure that despite its military prowess, the Soviet Union would retreat whenever confronted by a resolute United States because its leaders could not risk upsetting their precarious domestic balance.²⁷ Likewise, if only the Obama administration had supported the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran – even verbally – it might well have succeeded.²⁸ A few years later, opponents of nuclear diplomacy argued that compromise was unnecessary, since with more pressure the regime would have no choice but to comply with Western demands. A better deal was possible because of the weakness in Tehran. The enemy regime is always a house of cards on the verge of collapse, which makes it vulnerable to our pressure – but also insecure, desperate and even more dangerous.

They are realists; they only understand the language of force

One of the iron rules about perception in international politics is that the other is a 'realist'. We have principles that shape our decisions, but the other side, in the enemy image, always acts in strict accordance with its national interest. This is particularly true of any state with which we have even a mild rivalry, or any reason to suspect its motives. Many observers

consider Russian President Vladimir Putin to be particularly ruthless and single-minded in pursuing power and interest. China is commonly portrayed as a paragon of *realpolitik*, whether in Africa, Latin America or its nearby seas.²⁹ The so-called 'Arab street' routinely rejects any explanation for US policy in the Middle East that does not begin and end with the pursuit of oil.

This belief that the enemy is a realist leads naturally to the conclusion that it seeks to expand its power. Central to the enemy's eternal nature, therefore, is deep-seated cultural dissatisfaction with the status quo. We are interested in maintaining the world as it is; they want to change the balance of power in their favour.³⁰ Throughout the Cold War, Western leaders were easily convinced of the expansionary nature of international communism (although they tended to overlook the same dimensions of their support for the aspirations of freedom-loving people everywhere). 'Soviet leaders are first and foremost offensively rather than defensively minded', declared the intelligence oversight committee nicknamed 'Team B', while the United States obviously favoured defence.³¹ Likewise, Soviet leaders felt that the United States 'was not satisfied with the nuclear balance and continued to seek strategic superiority', according to another contemporary analysis, and 'had not rejected the idea of pre-emptive war'.³² Today, Iran's revisionist intentions and desire to dominate the Middle East are common knowledge in the foreign-policy community. Henry Kissinger warned the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2015 that Iran 'reflects a history of empire', which was 'one of the major themes' of its strategic culture.³³ The enemy always seeks to adjust the balance of power to its advantage, whereas we are interested in the peace and stability that accompanies our interpretation of the status quo.

A general policy prescription follows logically from this ubiquitous assumption that the other is monomaniacally focused on power. As senior Truman administration adviser Clark Clifford explained to the president, 'the language of military power is the only language which disciples of power politics understand'.³⁴ Power politics needs to be met with power, with military strength and determination. Its practitioners respond to little else; *realpolitik* has essentially robbed the enemy of its ability to understand

nuance and subtlety, or to care about anything except its national interest. Thus the eternal, endlessly repeated prescription when dealing with enemies is that they 'only understand the language of force'.

As it turns out, every enemy or rival of the United States in the last half-century, from the North Vietnamese to the Sandinistas to Saddam Hussein, has 'only understood' force. In 1986, Ronald Reagan announced a 'victory in the global battle against terrorism' after sending a message 'in the only language Khadafy seems to understand', which was in that case an airstrike that killed the Libyan leader's 15-month-old daughter.³⁵ Madeleine Albright, Richard Holbrooke and other US officials consistently argued throughout the 1990s that the various Balkan leaders, especially Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, only understood the language of force.³⁶ American leaders from Truman onwards consistently felt that the Soviet Union was incapable of grasping diplomatic subtleties.³⁷ Even some of our most seasoned diplomats have agreed: In his famous 'long telegram', George Kennan wrote that Soviet power was 'impervious to [the] logic of reason' but 'highly sensitive to [the] logic of force'.³⁸

Cooperative approaches are not only a waste of time, therefore, but counterproductive, since they display weakness to realist enemy actors who are always on the lookout for opportunities to increase their power. Forceful measures have a far greater chance of success.

Our various enemies work together

The enemy image blurs distinctions among those we distrust. Many people considered communism to be a monolithic force throughout the Cold War, for example, even after the Soviets and the Chinese engaged in open warfare in the late 1960s. 'International communism is in effect a single party', explained Dulles, no matter what evidence may have existed to the contrary.³⁹ 'There isn't any difference in totalitarian states', according to President Truman. 'You call them Nazi, Communist or Fascist, or Franco, or anything else – they're all alike ... The police state is a police state; I don't care what you call it.'⁴⁰ After 9/11, George W. Bush believed that al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were united by their common hatred of the United States. 'In my judgement', the president said in October 2002, Saddam 'would like

to use al-Qaeda as a forward army.⁴¹ In 2014, Netanyahu asked the United Nations to accept the notion that ‘ Hamas is ISIS and ISIS is Hamas’, since all Islamic militants are essentially identical.⁴² The enemy image interferes with the ability to detect the differences between foes, leading to the perception that the world is populated by a series of potential rivals working together to undermine our way of life.

Not only is evil always united, it also generally has an epicentre. ‘ There seems to be a curious American tendency’, observed Kennan towards the end of his life, ‘ to search, at all times, for a single external center of evil, to which all our troubles can be attributed, rather than to recognize that there might be multiple sources of resistance to our purposes and undertakings, and that these sources might be relatively independent of each other.’⁴³ During the Cold War, the root of the world’s ills was obvious; today it appears equally plain for many observers of international affairs. Iran has become to the twenty-first century what the Soviet Union was to the second half of the twentieth: evil’s epicentre, the origin and supporter of the world’s problems, from terrorism to radicalism to proliferation. The road to victory in the ‘ war on terror’, therefore, goes through Tehran. The perception is mutual: for many Iranian analysts, most of the evil in the world can be traced back to machinations emanating in Washington.⁴⁴ Defeating the enemy would not merely remove a rival but essentially remove evil from the world, a goal for which no amount of urgency is sufficient.

They are superior strategists; they take the long view

In his seminal work on perception and misperception, Jervis observed that, for a variety of reasons, ‘ actors tend to see the behavior of others as more centralized, disciplined, and coordinated than it is’.⁴⁵ People are aware of their own internal deliberations and divisions but see only the *outcomes* of decisions made elsewhere, which makes other actors seem unified and strategic. In addition, because of their particular cultural predisposition, rivals seem perfectly willing to put off achievement of their goals for generations if necessary. Enemies have the gift of patience.

Authoritarian states in particular appear to have an advantage over democracies when it comes to making strategy. Unencumbered by public

opinion, oversight or constitutions, dictators can run efficient policy processes. Unlike us, they have no meaningful disagreement over national interests and objectives, and can quickly settle upon the most efficient means to pursue those ends. US policymakers sometimes seemed jealous of the freedom of action that tyranny afforded Soviet leaders, while simultaneously warning of the advantages it created. As a result of centralised decision-making, enemy policy is always more calculated, unified and strategic than ours can hope to be.

Enemies are superior at long-term planning as well. While our leaders rarely think beyond the present crisis, theirs combine wisdom with cunning and patience. To use the common metaphor, they play chess while we play checkers. The Soviets were by nature patient, long-term strategists, according to many American observers. Team B warned that the first item emphasised by Soviet doctrine was ‘unflagging persistence and patience’.⁴⁶ Moscow was willing to wait decades or even generations for the collapse of the West, confident in its eventual victory.⁴⁷ Post-Cold War enemies have been equally far-sighted and sagacious: Western leaders faced the chess master Vladimir Putin in eastern Ukraine.⁴⁸ The Chinese are commonly thought to be equally good strategists, far superior to those in the West, planning two, three or four decades into the future on a regular basis.⁴⁹ Islamic fundamentalists might not be remotely close to achieving their goal of a re-established caliphate, but that should be of no comfort because they are willing to wait many years to see it come to fruition.⁵⁰

Enemies are also better at implementation. While we realise that our actions are often ad hoc and reactive, we tend to believe that theirs are part of a master plan, and assume that their actions usually have the result they intended.⁵¹ Once the enemy image has taken hold, ‘each party attributes to the other a degree of omniscience and omnipotence that he knows is manifestly impossible in his own situation’, wrote the eminent social psychologist Raymond Bauer more than a half-century ago. ‘It is often assumed that if “the intentions of the Soviet leaders” can be deciphered, these “intentions” can almost automatically be assumed to be implemented.’⁵² The idea that accidents, chance, blunders or bureaucratic inefficiency – the kinds of things that we know often plague us – could have affected their actions is

rarely given sufficient consideration. Or, as Jervis bluntly put it, 'like confusion, stupidity is rarely given its due'.⁵³

Our fear of their strategic superiority often finds expression in rhetoric, and inspires a series of key terms that can be considered indicators in themselves. Most commonly, the enemy image inspires actors to believe that while we have 'principles' or enduring values, they have an 'agenda' or secret, ulterior motivation. No document makes this distinction more clearly than NSC-68, the famous top-secret policy document prepared by senior Truman administration officials in 1950. NSC-68 spends a good deal of time explaining the fundamental differences between the two superpowers, referring repeatedly and endlessly to the 'design' of the Kremlin and the 'purpose' of the United States.⁵⁴ The difference in terminology is important, and common to the enemy image. Whether in domestic or international politics, agendas and designs are secret and shrouded in dishonesty; principles and purposes are noble, transparent and admirable.

They understand us, and know that we will not use force

Largely due to their superior strategic capability, our enemies understand us far better than we understand them. Richard Pipes argued during the Cold War that Soviet strategists had an enormous advantage over their counterparts in the West, since they emerged 'from the background of an international revolutionary movement', which meant they 'always had a keen interest in Western societies'.⁵⁵ Many senior Iranian leaders have spent time in the West, which appears to give them an edge in comprehending our strengths and weaknesses. Our understanding of enemies – outside of a small coterie of experts – is always rudimentary at best.

Our enemies know, for instance, that our intentions are essentially benign, and that we will not attack. In effect, the enemy image convinces its host to believe that the natural distrust that states feel toward one another is not present in its rivals, because they know we are rational and trustworthy. Ronald Reagan argued in 1983 that 'Soviet leaders know full well there is no political constituency in the United States or anywhere in the West for aggressive military action against them'.⁵⁶ In the same year, Defense Department official Richard Perle lamented to Congress that the Soviets

'can be quite confident in the Kremlin that the United States is not going to launch an aggressive war against them', while 'we can have no such confidence'.⁵⁷ A generation later, Russian protests over NATO expansion – though nearly universal – were not taken seriously, since US planners believed that Moscow knew the alliance harboured no offensive motivations. Expansion would actually be good for Moscow.⁵⁸ Today's Iranian leaders know that the Obama administration will not use military force against their nuclear programme. Likewise, Putin does not fear the massive military advantage held by the West. 'Who would launch such an invasion?', asked Robert Kagan. 'For the first time in Russia's long history, it does not face a strategic threat on its western flank.'⁵⁹

In practice this means that enemies are often perceived to be essentially immune to the kind of insecurities that lead to 'security dilemmas', the well-known phenomenon in which insecurity drives states to take actions that decrease the security of their neighbours.⁶⁰ They are offensively, not defensively minded; their actions are not caused by anything we have done, since they know our intentions are peaceful. Since the security of the enemy state is essentially secure, it must have other, more sinister intentions for its actions.

Proof of those intentions can be seen in their force planning. Since they have nothing to fear from us, enemies commonly exhibit a mismatch between stated policy ends and means: they always appear to be overspending, devoting far more resources toward their military than their minimal defence concerns would warrant. Weinberger told Congress in 1982 that the Soviets

do not need a new intercontinental bomber to defend the Soviet Union, and it is not being produced because of a fear of the United States. It is being produced in keeping with their plan to secure worldwide military superiority and domination ... the Soviets do not need an aircraft carrier to defend the Soviet Union ... they do not need the increased number of divisions to defend the Soviet Union ... they do not need all the additional fighters and bomber aircraft and all the armored fighting vehicles and all the ICBMs ... to defend the Soviet Union.⁶¹

In 2015, the enemy image prevented any acknowledgement that an Iranian nuclear programme could be essentially defensive, since Tehran had nothing to fear from the United States. Iranian leaders had to know that US leaders had no stomach for another war in the Middle East.

The enemy image makes it all but impossible for leaders to recognise ‘spiral model’ dynamics, where states can be essentially locked in a mutually destructive cascade of tension, arms build-ups and potential conflict.⁶² Since our enemies understand our benevolence – and use it to their advantage – we know that their decisions are essentially unrelated to our actions.

Our experts know the enemy's true nature

Experience and expertise ought to provide foreign-policy elites the tools to form better, more accurate perceptions than those of the masses. Often this is the case: regional experts in particular are usually better at empathising with the people of the areas they study, and are less likely to form unduly negative impressions. But in general the foreign-policy expert class tends to be more susceptible to the effects of the enemy image than the average person, which is a counterintuitive point in need of some explanation.

Firstly, so-called experts are under social pressure to identify enemies. In the American system – and probably elsewhere – hawkishness and suspicion of others is nearly a prerequisite for being taken seriously in elite foreign-policy circles. Little professional credibility is gained from being the outlier, at least in the direction of cooperation. Elites formed negative images of Iran much faster than did the general public during the hostage crisis in 1979, for instance.⁶³ A generation later, eminent foreign-policy observer Leslie Gelb supported the invasion of Iraq because, as he admitted later, ‘of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy community, namely the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility’.⁶⁴ Failure to appear sufficiently tough on enemies is an efficient way to be branded an appeaser and expelled from the foreign-policy aristocracy.

Secondly, those with more knowledge about foreign affairs are less likely to change their opinions of others, especially when those opinions are negative. Experimental evidence indicates that new information struggles to

alter the long-held beliefs of the expert, while the shallow views of neophytes tend to be more malleable.⁶⁵ Experts face pressure to be consistent in their theories and judgements, and rarely change in fundamental ways.

The elite class is more likely to develop enemy images, in other words, and less likely to change them in the face of new information.⁶⁶ Following the death of Stalin, journalists and casual observers were more likely to detect evolution in Soviet motivations and behaviour than were experts.⁶⁷ Throughout the Cold War, 'Sovietologists' tended to be far more sceptical of the potential for fundamental change in the Kremlin, no matter who was in charge, from Lenin to Gorbachev.⁶⁸ 'Amerikanists' in the Soviet Union, whose models of the United States were predicated on eternal hostility, were no better in interpreting American overtures.⁶⁹ Since the Cold War's end, former hardliners have been loudest in attributing Putin's aggression in his near abroad to eternal Russian cultural characteristics.⁷⁰

Not all members of the elite foreign-policy class are equally susceptible to pathological perceptions. Political ideology is strongly linked to risk perceptions: people who hold right-of-centre views have a greater predisposition to believe that the world is a dangerous place than do those on the left.⁷¹ Conservative parties everywhere tend to identify enemies more quickly than their competitors. Suspicion of outsiders and paranoid politics is so central to right-wing populism, from the National Front in France to the Danish People's Party, that it can be considered one of the defining features of the movement. Soviet conservatives were consistently much more hostile toward the United States than were Moscow's liberals.⁷² In American politics, neoconservatives consistently detect greater numbers of enemies, and therefore higher levels of threat, than other analysts.⁷³ Neoconservatives were the most concerned about the implacable, eternal hostility of the Soviet Union and a host of post-Cold War actors, including Saddam Hussein's Iraq, as well as Iran and China.⁷⁴ The causal direction is unclear – high perceptions of threat and enemy images may lead one to become conservative, rather than conservatism leading to the identification of enemies – but there is no doubt that an association exists.⁷⁵

Expertise creates fertile ground for the enemy image, as does conservative politics. Conservative experts, therefore, run the highest risk

of misperceiving the hostility of other states. When such people are decisive in opposing capitals, the corresponding risk of mutual misperception, spiral dynamics and war is at its highest.

They are Nazis

Finally, if there is one iron-clad indicator of the enemy image, it is this: the comparison of rivals to Nazis. The enemy is not just evil but the modern moral equivalent of Hitler; it is always 1938, and we are perpetually at Munich. Often both sides of a dispute are convinced that they face the modern incarnation of Hitler. The Cold War pitted Hitler in the Kremlin against the fascists in the White House, as does the current dispute over Ukraine. Today's state-controlled Russian media overflows with comparisons of the United States and its Ukrainian puppets and 1930s fascists.⁷⁶ It is not hard to find someone in a position of influence in the United States equating Iran with the Nazis, and the Iranian press commonly makes the same comparison.⁷⁷

Hitler analogies are often rhetorical, used to support policy decisions already made. The George H.W. Bush administration paved the way for war against Iraq in 1991 with a steady stream of Hitler talk: between the invasion of Kuwait and the onset of *Desert Shield*, there were 228 articles published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* that made reference to Nazis in one way or another.⁷⁸ At other times, policymakers appear to believe their own rhetoric. In the Pentagon during the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War, secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld understood the Ba'ath Party in Iraq to be essentially a reincarnation of the Nazis. His deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, expressed his view of a proposal to integrate Sunnis into the post-war settlement on an internal memo simply with 'They are Nazis!' Third-in-command Douglas Feith believed that Saddam was even worse than Hitler, because he was in office far longer.⁷⁹

The intellectual and moral sloppiness of comparing rivals to Hitler is well known, but the pace of analogy continues unabated. Accommodation with others is still commonly labelled as appeasement, as the current debate over the Iranian nuclear programme makes clear. Beliefs are slow to change, even when faced with overwhelming logic and evidence to the contrary.⁸⁰ When Nazis haunt decision-makers, folly follows.

* * *

Sometimes there is inherent bad faith on the part of other actors. Sometimes they really are plotting against us, probing for weaknesses and biding their time to strike. Sometimes they do have a secret, nefarious, long-term master plan. It is certainly not the case that all enemy images are misconceived. Prudence might suggest erring on the side of caution, mimicking the paranoia of Churchill rather than the faith of Chamberlain.

Danger does not only exist on one side of that equation, however. The exaggerated hostility that accompanies the enemy image is far more common, and inspires unwary leaders to enact unnecessarily belligerent, costly and counterproductive policies. The challenge is to separate truly devious actors from those simply pursuing national interests, those with whom deals can be cut and accommodations made. Not all enemies are existential. Many can be mollified, or even simply be monitored and resisted without ever succumbing to the kind of pathological fear that some of them probably hope to create.

Robert Jervis was right: policymakers will never be able to consult a magic formula to assess the accuracy of their perceptions. The preceding beliefs can, however, serve as indicators of pathological misperception. They are not all false, at least not in all occasions; the presence of one or two of these factors indicates nothing in particular. But policymakers should be aware that these beliefs have been indicators of misperceived hostility in the past. They have inspired overreaction, blunder and, sometimes, national ruin.

Notes

- 1 See Arthur Gladstone, 'The Conception of the Enemy', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 3, no. 2, June 1959, pp. 132–7; David J. Finlay, Ole R. Holsti and Richard R. Fagen, *Enemies in Politics* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1967); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Douglas Stuart and Harvey Starr, 'The "Inherent Bad Faith Model" Reconsidered: Dulles, Kennedy, and Kissinger', *Political Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 3/4, Autumn 1981–Winter 1982, pp. 1–33; Ralph K. White, *Fearful Warriors: A Psychological Profile of U.S.-Soviet Relations* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Richard

- Herrmann, 'Analyzing Soviet Images of the United States: A Psychological Theory and Empirical Study', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 29, no. 4, December 1985, pp. 665–97; and others cited below.
- 2 Ralph K. White, *Nobody Wanted War: Misperception in Vietnam and Other Wars* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Col., Inc., 1968).
 - 3 See Graham Allison and Dimitri K. Simes, 'Russia and America: Stumbling toward War', *National Interest*, no. 134, May–June 2015; and Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller (eds), *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.–China Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).
 - 4 Deborah Welch Larson makes a similar point. See Deborah Welch Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust: U.S.–Soviet Relations during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 5.
 - 5 The 'inherent good-faith' image does not imply a belief in the benevolence of others, but rather the tendency, through wishful thinking, to underestimate the threat they pose.
 - 6 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, p. 409.
 - 7 For a discussion, see Christian Enemark, *Armed Drones and the Ethics of War: Military Virtue in a Post-Heroic Age* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
 - 8 Richard Pipes, 'Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War', *Commentary*, vol. 64, no. 1, July 1977, pp. 21–34.
 - 9 The term 'mirror imaging' can refer to different concepts, depending on context. For an explanation of its most common use among hawks, see Raymond L. Garthoff, 'On Estimating and Imputing Intentions', *International Security*, vol. 2, no. 3, Winter 1978, pp. 22–33.
 - 10 Quoted by Daniel Frei, *Perceived Images: U.S. and Soviet Assumptions and Perceptions in Disarmament* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1986), p. 144.
 - 11 For one such doubter, see the discussion of Richard Perle in Keith L. Shimko, *Images and Arms Control: Perceptions of the Soviet Union in the Reagan Administration* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 70.
 - 12 See Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 123; and Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War* (New York: Vintage, 1983).
 - 13 Soviet archives have produced little evidence that Soviet leaders thought any differently about nuclear war than their counterparts in the West. See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Richard Ned Lebow, 'Deterrence: Then and Now', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 28, no. 5, October 2005, pp. 765–73.
 - 14 See, for instance, Thomas Donnelly, Danielle Pletka and Maseh Zarif, 'Containing and Deterring a Nuclear Iran: Questions for Strategy, Requirements for Military Forces', American Enterprise Institute, December 2011.

- 15 Quoted in Stuart and Starr, 'The "Inherent Bad Faith Model" Reconsidered', p. 12.
- 16 Bernard Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 2011), p. 148. See also Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: The Long Struggle against Islamofascism* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
- 17 David G. Coleman, *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), p. 37.
- 18 John Mearsheimer disagrees, suggesting instead that lying in international politics is actually relatively rare. John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 19 Quoted in Frei, *Perceived Images*, p. 125.
- 20 Richard Pipes, 'How to Cope With the Soviet Threat: A Long-Term Strategy for the West', *Commentary*, vol. 78, no. 2, August 1984, pp. 13–30, esp. p. 18.
- 21 Quoted in Robert Jervis, 'The United States and Iran: Perceptions and Policy Traps', in Abbas Maleki and John Tirman (eds), *U.S.-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 18.
- 22 Charles E. Osgood, 'Suggestions for Winning the Real War with Communism', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 3, no. 4, December 1959, pp. 295–325. See also Jason C. Flanagan, *Imagining the Enemy: American Presidential War Rhetoric from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 2009).
- 23 White, *Fearful Warriors*, p. 148.
- 24 Vice President Dick Cheney was the most prominent – but hardly the only – official to espouse what might be thought of as 'liberation theology'. See his comments on *Meet the Press*, NBC, 16 March 2003, quoted on *Meet the Press*, NBC, 14 September 2003, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3080244/ns/meet_the_press/t/transcript-sept/.
- 25 Finlay, Holsti and Fagen, *Enemies in Politics*, p. 67.
- 26 Michael Ledeen, *Accomplice to Evil: Iran and the War against the West* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2009), p. 189.
- 27 Richard R. Herrmann, 'American Perspectives of Soviet Foreign Policy: Reconsidering Three Competing Perspectives', *Political Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 3, September 1985, pp. 375–411, esp. p. 378.
- 28 Senator John McCain was typical of this sentiment, complaining that the president failed to 'unleash America's full moral power to support the Iranian people', while leaving the details of unleashed moral power rather unclear. Quoted in 'What if the Obama Administration Fully Sided with Iran's Green Movement?', *Washington Post*, 12 June 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/11/AR2010061106014.html>.
- 29 Thomas Christensen memorably called China the 'high church of realpolitik'. See Thomas Christensen, 'Chinese Realpolitik', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 5, September–October 1995, p. 37.
- 30 In international-relations-theory terms, they are 'revisionists' while we are a 'status quo' power. See Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*

- (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 125–6; and Randall L. Schweller, ‘Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In’, *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 1, Summer 1994, pp. 72–107.
- ³¹ Intelligence Community Experiment in Competitive Analysis: Soviet Strategic Objectives: An Alternative View, Report of Team ‘B’, December 1976, p. 2, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB139/nitze10.pdf>.
- ³² William D. Jackson, ‘Soviet Images of the U.S. as a Nuclear Adversary, 1969–1979’, *World Politics*, vol. 33, no. 4, July 1981, pp. 617–18.
- ³³ He gave no explanation for why the Parthians and Sassanids are more relevant to modern Iranian foreign policy than the last two centuries, which contain no examples of attempted conquest. Henry Kissinger, testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 30 January 2015, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?323996-1/hearing-national-security-strategy>.
- ³⁴ Clark Clifford, memorandum to President Truman, 24 September 1946, available at <http://projects.ecfs.org/fieldston57/since40/units/unit1/supplements/clifford.html>. Jervis discusses this tendency further in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, p. 310.
- ³⁵ Helen Thomas, ‘Reagan: Air Strike against Libya Victory against Terrorism’, UPI, 15 April 1966, http://100years.upi.com/sta_1986-04-15.html.
- ³⁶ Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Miramax, 2005), p. 408. See also ‘War in Europe: NATO’s 1999 War against Serbia over Kosovo’, *Frontline*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/>.
- ³⁷ Truman stated repeatedly to his advisers that ‘force is the only thing they [the Soviets] understand’. Quoted in Mark K. Updegrave, *Baptism by Fire: Eight Presidents Who Took Office in Times of Crisis* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2008), p. 166.
- ³⁸ George Kennan, ‘The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State’, also known as the ‘Long Telegram’, 22 February 1946, available at <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>. He also once wrote that ‘the endless, fluid pursuit of power is a habit of Russian statesmanship, ingrained not only in the traditions of the Russian State but also in the ideology of the Communist Party’. Quoted in Ernest May, *Lessons of the Past: The Uses and Misuses of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 27.
- ³⁹ Finlay, Holsti and Fagen, *Enemies in Politics*, p. 84.
- ⁴⁰ Flanagan, *Imagining the Enemy*, p. 87.
- ⁴¹ George W. Bush, ‘Remarks by the President at Thaddeus McCotter for Congress Dinner’, 14 October 2002, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/10/print/20021014-3.html>.
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- ⁴³ George Kennan, *At a Century's Ending: Reflections 1982–1995* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 87.
- ⁴⁴ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, 'Iranian Perceptions of U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei's Mind Set', in Maleki and Tirman (eds), *U.S.–Iran Misperceptions*, pp. 37–56; and Kayhan Barzegar, 'Iran's Perception of the U.S. Policy Toward the Region', *ibid.*, pp. 89–110.
- ⁴⁵ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, p. 319.
- ⁴⁶ Team 'B' Report, p. 3.
- ⁴⁷ In the 1970s, the United States created the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense to address its perceived inferiority in long-term planning. See Andrew W. Marshall, *Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, April 1972).
- ⁴⁸ The chairman of the US House Intelligence Committee believed checkers gave Obama too much credit; the president was actually only playing marbles. See Laura Bassett, 'Mike Rogers: Putin is Playing Chess, Obama Playing Marbles', *Huffington Post*, 2 March 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/02/mike-rogers-russia_n_4884922.html.
- ⁴⁹ For some examples of this argument, see Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2015); Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, 2nd edition (New York: Penguin, 2012); and Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2012).
- ⁵⁰ For a representative expression of this concern, see Michael Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, revised edition, 2007).
- ⁵¹ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, p. 350.
- ⁵² Raymond A. Bauer, 'Problems of Perception and the Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 5, no. 3, September 1961, p. 225.
- ⁵³ 'When it seems that only hostility and duplicity could account for the other's behavior, observers should not immediately assume that any coherent policy lies behind the activities.' Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 323, 342.
- ⁵⁴ There are at least 49 references to the 'design' of the Kremlin in NSC-68. See S. Nelson Drew (ed.), *NSC-68: Forging the Strategy of Containment* (Washington DC: National Defense University, 1996).
- ⁵⁵ Richard Pipes, 'Militarism and the Soviet State', *Daedalus*, vol. 109, no. 4, Fall 1980, pp. 1–12.
- ⁵⁶ Quoted in Shimko, *Images and Arms Control*, p. 117.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ⁵⁸ See Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'A Plan for Europe: How to Expand NATO', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 1, January–February 1995, pp. 26–42.
- ⁵⁹ Robert Kagan, 'The United States Must Resist a Return to Spheres of Interest in the International System', Brookings Institution, 19 February 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/>

- posts/2015/02/19-united-states-must-resist-return-to-spheres-of-interest-international-system-kagan?cid=00900015020149101US0001-0221.
- ⁶⁰ John H. Herz, 'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, vol. 2, no. 2, January 1950, pp. 157–80; and Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, January 1978, pp. 167–214.
- ⁶¹ Shimko, *Images and Arms Control*, p. 69.
- ⁶² For an explanation of the spiral model, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 62–78.
- ⁶³ Pamela Johnston Conover, Karen A. Mingst and Lee Sigelman, 'Mirror Images in Americans' Perceptions of Nations and Leaders during the Iranian Hostage Crisis', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1980, pp. 325–37.
- ⁶⁴ Leslie H. Gelb and Jeanne-Paloma Zelmatti, 'Mission Unaccomplished', *Democracy*, no. 13, Summer 2009, p. 24.
- ⁶⁵ Mark Peffley and Jon Hurwitz, 'International Events and Foreign Policy Beliefs: Public Response to Changing Soviet–U.S. Relations', *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 2, May 1992, pp. 431–61.
- ⁶⁶ Shoon Kathleen Murray and Jonathan A. Cowden, 'The Role of "Enemy Images" and Ideology in Elite Belief Systems', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 3, September 1999, pp. 455–81.
- ⁶⁷ Bauer, 'Problems of Perception and the Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union', p. 227.
- ⁶⁸ See almost any of the works of Richard Pipes, such as 'Can the Soviet Union Reform?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 1, Fall 1984, pp. 47–61.
- ⁶⁹ Bauer, 'Problems of Perception and the Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union'.
- ⁷⁰ See Richard Pipes, 'Is Russia Still an Enemy?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 5, September/October 1997, pp. 65–78; Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Putin's Choice', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 2, Spring 2008, pp. 95–116; and Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).
- ⁷¹ Paul Slovic, *The Perception of Risk* (London: Earthscan, 2000).
- ⁷² William D. Jackson, 'Soviet Images of the U.S. as a Nuclear Adversary, 1969–1979', *World Politics*, vol. 33, no. 4, July 1981, pp. 614–38.
- ⁷³ For a discussion of neoconservatism and its exceptionally high perceptions of threat, see Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- ⁷⁴ Some of the more prominent neo-conservative works – and those exemplary of the movement's comfort with identifying enemies – include Robert Kagan and William Kristol (eds), *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000); Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War Over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2003); Podhoretz, *World War IV*; David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York:

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- ⁷⁵ A series of polls from the Netherlands in the 1980s concluded that conservatives were more inclined to construct enemy images than were liberals; see Leon Wecke, 'Enemy Images in Public Opinion', in Henk-Jan Rebel and Leon Wecke (eds), *Friends, Foes, Values and Fears* (Amsterdam: Studiecentrum voor Vredesvraagstukken, 1987), pp. 145–87. See also Peter Liberman, 'An Eye for an Eye: Public Support for War against Evil-doers', *International Organization*, vol. 60, no. 3, Summer 2006, pp. 687–722.
- ⁷⁶ Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).
- ⁷⁷ Iran's Fars News not only compares Israel and the United States to Nazi Germany on a regular basis, but has even reprinted claims that the US government has been secretly run by a 'shadow government' of space aliens since 1945. See Max Fisher, 'Iranian News Agency Says the U.S. is Secretly Run by Nazi Space Aliens', *Washington Post*, 13 January 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/01/13/iranian-news-agency-says-the-u-s-is-secretly-run-by-nazi-space-aliens-really/>.
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- ⁸⁰ See also Christopher J. Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory and Hubris in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

