Perspective Taking and Analysis

Lecture 1: Introduction

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> "I think – look, whether – whether or not – so first of all, it's hard for me to get in – it's hard for us to get inside the head of the Taliban and exactly what their goal and intent was here. And this just happened today, so I – I can't deliver a – a comprehensive analysis of – of what we believe they were trying to achieve or what message we – you know, they – they were trying to send."
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> —*John Kirby, April 7 2021*

1 Objective

The objective of this course is to train you in understanding other people effectively, regardless of how different they may be from you. Many careers in the public and private sectors will bring you in contact with individuals and groups whose values are different from your own, whose ways of making decisions are unfamiliar to you and whose motivations are ambiguous. To achieve your objectives, you need to understand these individuals and groups, whether that's to build a relationship with them, compete against them, or engage them in another way. You will often lack time and information for this task, regardless if you're carrying it out on the ground among the individuals and groups or at a distance without direct access to them. These factors add to the challenge of understanding people whose motivations and behaviors are sophisticated, yet rarely clear.

We can differentiate between two main approaches for understanding others. In the first approach, perspective taking, we construct hypotheses about the internal states of a person, such as their motivations and intent. In the second approach, analysis, we assess the external states of a person, such as their observable actions and the environment in which these actions take place. In practice, we often need to use both approaches to make sense of someone's behavior and predict what actions they will take next. The course investigates how these approaches can best be trained, integrated and deployed to effectively understand other people in environments of imperfect information.

The goal of the course is thus to provide you with a skill that diplomats and intelligence professionals place at the core of their craft. William Burns, the current Director of CIA, remarked about his career dealing with foreign leaders that it was essential "to put myself in their shoes and understand their perspectives and dispositions" (Burns, 2019, 19). Former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, identified empathy as the most important trait in his profession and singled out the ability to

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"humanize yourself and your counterparts" (Munter, 2019). David Petraeus, the former commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, remarked that success in his mission depended on building relationships with the local population and understanding "the human terrain and everything that affects it. As we say, try to walk a mile in their shoes" (Petraeus, 2013). Henry Crumpton, a former high-ranking counterterrorism official who led the CIA's Afghanistan campaign in 2001 and 2002, stated that training "empathetic intuition" was necessary in his line of work to avert "deeply flawed conclusions, bungled operations, and catastrophic policy decisions" (Crumpton, 2012a, 63-64). Private sector executives have echoed the importance of being able to put yourself in the shoes of people shaped by different backgrounds and experiences (Elder, 2020; Ghodsi, 2021; Nadella, 2021).

This leads us to a core tenet of the course. The challenges that an intelligence professional faces in trying to understand an individual or group are fundamentally similar to the challenges faced by, representative for the private sector, a salesperson trying to understand a prospective customer (see Crumpton, 2012b). The stakes are vastly different for each endeavor, yet the problem that needs to be solved is not: Develop a timely and reliable understanding of one or more individuals whose views of the world may be significantly different from yours, who are connected to each other in dynamic relationships that are ambiguous to you as an outsider, whose stated intents may differ from or contradict their actions taken, whose stated beliefs may not reflect or hide their true beliefs, whose incentives are unclear and may compete with yours; individuals to which you may have limited, irregular or no access at all, and whom you thus need to engage in a challenging, unreliable information environment.

1.1 Constraints

I have grappled with the problem of understanding other people in both the private and public sectors. After two years at SAIS researching the Taliban's organizational structure, and the ways in which its opaque changes complicated the war in Afghanistan, I moved into sales roles at American technology companies, focused on establishing relationships with and winning business from large German enterprises. The course is built around this experience and the lessons I have learned at the intersection of both worlds. Prior to research and sales, I trained four years and worked one year as an actor at a German theater. The experience of adopting, developing and inhabiting a character offers a useful nuance to understanding other people and we will consider it towards the end of the course.

Whatever the domain, there is no easy way to solve the problem of understanding other people in environments of imperfect information. A clean, comprehensive solution is rarely possible. The human terrain is too complex to be mapped like its physical counterpart. This leads us to another core tenet of the course. Our understanding of other people is necessarily constrained and we need to accept and work within these constraints. Assuming that any method can enable us to 'read' people like one reads a map is deeply flawed and leads to the operational missteps that Crumpton has warned against. Humility, detached respect for your counterparts, and keen self-awareness matter far more than any method or analytic framework, including the ones you will learn in this course.

Reinforcing the limitations imposed on methods and frameworks in this endeavor, people skilled at understanding others often attribute their skill to long, itinerant years spent interacting with people from different backgrounds across environments and cultures (Crumpton, 2012a; Burns, 2019; Ghodsi, 2021). A study commissioned by the the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory board from 2001 to 2005 on the backgrounds of the CIA's best operations officers and analysts underscored the importance of unstructured life experience. The study found that "the best officers were usually those who had

accumulated a broad range of diverse and enlightening experiences prior to joining government service. These men and women developed more open, more empathetic views of others. With their accumulated experiences they could engage with a broader range of people" (Crumpton, 2012a, 64). Another study commissioned decades earlier by the CIA itself came to a similar conclusion. It identified a "high tolerance for ambiguity" as one of the essential characteristics of a successful operations officer (Bird, 2014, 23).[1] The behavior of others, especially in unfamiliar environments, is often ambiguous as it allows for multiple competing interpretations. Is someone rebuffing you or hinting at a willingness to cooperate? Is someone likely to hold their word or walking off without following through? Exposure to different people, situations and environments allows you to spot patterns in behavior and provides you with a richer frame of reference for interpreting it. Diverse, unstructured life experience is the best source for learning how to understand others and make sense of their ambiguous behavior.

1.2 Historical context

The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provide the historical context of the course, although some of the cases examined in the course are taken from different domains in the private sector. The overarching reason for situating our investigation of perspective taking and analysis in the events of the Global War on Terrorism is the sudden rise and dominance after 9/11 of new types of actors and information environments, which forced a rethink of established assumptions about human behavior and the ways in which it can be understood through data. Before the September 11 attacks, the methods underpinning U.S. defense, from deterrence to the collection of human intelligence, had been centered on the model of a nation state actor whose motivations and behavior were largely well understood and whose organizational structures were well documented. After the attacks, the U.S. found itself confronted by a different, more heterogenous threat in the form of armed non-state actors, comprising terrorist groups, insurgents and other irregular political movements. These actors were embedded in populations whose cultures the U.S. had limited experience with, recruited individuals whose motivations were difficult to relate to and operated in ways that were hard to identify and track. As one U.S. soldier deployed to Kandahar province in Afghanistan in 2010 put it, "I keep trying to put myself into the mindset of the Taliban but I can't seem to wrap my head around it" (Coll, 2018, 417).

In the same way that the Cold War had been shaped by a perceived 'missile gap' as the Soviet Union's development of ballistic missiles was seen as critically outpacing the capabilities of the U.S., former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara argued that the onset of the Global War on Terrorism was shaped by an 'empathy gap' as the U.S. understood its enemies far less than they understood the U.S. (McNamara and Blight, 2003). Former Deputy National Security Adviser for Combating Terrorism, Juan Zarate, commented on the challenge at the heart of the empathy gap, "We have to recognize that when we're thinking about the enemy networks that we're trying to confront or counteract, they themselves are thinking about the landscape very differently" (Zarate, February 26, 2021).

To close the empathy gap, the U.S. government invested in a range of programs and methods for identifying and understanding individuals and groups in environments of imperfect information.

[1] Tolerance for ambiguity is also a required skill for many sales roles. At one financial technology company, out of the 69 sales roles it was hiring for in December 2020, 52, or 75%, required the "ability to operate in a highly ambiguous and fast-paced environment" (Klenner, 2021). Sales had the highest share of this requirement among all the company's departments with open positions. Note that recent recruitment ads by the CIA included that "while no specific background is required, candidates with experience in ... sales ... are highly desirable" (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019). The problem of understanding others and making sense of their ambiguous behavior is fundamental to both the public and private sectors.

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