

Strategic Culture and Pragmatic National Interest

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Nayef Al-Rodhan explores how the study of strategic culture remains important for understanding and addressing conflicts in an interdependent world.

The debate on Strategic Culture began almost four decades ago, and incited a rethinking of both the origins of strategy and the strategic choices in politics. Previously, culture had been dismissed, or at best considered an “explanation of last resort” in international politics. Although the effort to delineate the role of culture in strategy might at times suffer from lack of precision, the discussion on the influence of culture remains pertinent. Its continued relevance is evident not only in light of recent international events, such as the Ukrainian and Gazan conflicts, but also in providing further clarity across distinct national security strategies.

Strategic culture: definition and origins of the debate

Strategic culture provides an analytical lens through which to better view the continuities underlying international crises and the motivations of a state’s actions. Often these are undergirded by a state’s historical tendency to preserve its perceived spheres of influence. Strategic Culture can leave enduring legacies in a state’s strategic thinking for decades. Strategic culture is essentially an attempt to integrate cultural considerations, cumulative historical memory and their influences in the analysis of states’ security policies and international relations.

The origins of the connection between studies of culture and national security strategies date back to the 1940s and 1950s with the so-called “national character studies”. These studies were conducted by sociologists and cultural anthropologists employed during World War II by the US Office of War’s Foreign Morale Analysis Division. Their objective was to produce studies of the “national character” of the Axis powers, mainly Germany and Japan. Immediately after the WWII, however, the nuclear anxieties of the Cold War pushed the study of culture and its impact on national security into the background while concomitantly bringing forward rationalist explanations such as the deterrence theory. The latter was inspired from economics: the two superpowers were thought of as *homogenous rational actors* whose actions were driven by *rational choice*.

The paradigm of “strategic culture” was coined during the Cold War, in Jack Snyder’s report from 1977: “The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options”. He defined strategic culture as the “sum total of ideals, conditional emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of the national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to [...] strategy”. In line with the intellectual Zeitgeist, the paradigm was mainly applied to the issue of the day: nuclear strategy. In his work, Snyder argued that within the USSR, individuals were socialized into a specific Soviet mode of thinking and its leaders viewed the world through a unique strategic culture. Strategic culture was thus defined as a particular security and military vision, which became influential for policy makers. The endurance of such modes of thinking qualifies them as manifestations of a ‘culture’, rather than mere policy.

By and large, the study of the link between national culture and strategy remained modest during the Cold War. The re-energized interest in the influence of cultural idiosyncrasies on security found a better terrain for debate in a post-Cold War international system; liberated from the monopoly of realist and neo-realist theories. Culture and nation-specific narratives deserve a thorough examination in the analysis of state security because they are engrained in our irrational mental strata, forming a code of conduct that is strong enough to resist environmental changes. Culture, however, is not static, nor does it lock states or societies in emotive or subjective frameworks indefinitely. Many scholars suggest using varying levels of analysis, both at the levels of national culture as well as *organizational culture* (such as the military), with the former being the underlying context in which the latter is shaped.

The strategic culture of any given country has numerous sources and it is bound to remain an ‘elastic’ term given that there are various factors that influence the formation of national culture and a subsequent rationality for security policy and strategic thinking. Some essential principles can be extracted from the theoretical framings of strategic culture. Factors such as geopolitics, norms and customs, perceptions of regional and international roles, political systems and power sharing (including the balance between military and civilian actors or how military power and institutions are structured) are solidified in collective memory and identity through political narratives, education curricula, artistic and popular renderings of (often carefully selected) historical episodes, interpretations of common memories etc.

Each and every state enters the international arena with its historical baggage of accumulated experiences, beliefs, cultural influences and geographic and material limitations; all of which impact its conduct. Israel’s highly emotional view of its culture or Iran’s deep need for distinguishing itself are not just superficial facets of their ‘national personality’ but constant and predominant features of their foreign policy. Numerous states exhibit strong historical motivators, including the Arab World, Turkey, the two Koreas, Japan, India, and Pakistan.

A clear example of these historical motivators could be given by China. It is virtually impossible to look at the foreign policy of China without considering the deeper historical and cultural roots that shaped it. The overarching notions of endurance and humiliation, as constantly reiterated in the Chinese history curriculum, focus heavily on “the century of humiliation” in the 19th and early 20th century. Inflicted by the West and Japan, these experiences are drawn on heavily, although the curriculum tends to shy away from confronting distressing episodes such as the ‘Great Leap Forward’ or the ‘Cultural Revolution’. These discourses are also pools from which to draw legitimacy for ambitious projects such as their space program. Moreover, the salience of culture is reinforced when one observes the profound and continuous inspiration of the Middle Kingdom and the Sinocentric views of the world. The cult of defence, the teachings of Sun Tzu and Confucius and the uncompromised goal of national unification are all traits observed in the definition of Chinese security doctrines. Unearthing such symbols is especially relevant in the present day, when the doctrine of pacifism has been emphasized as further reassurance against allegations of aggressive behaviour on the part of Beijing, with Sun Tzu being recruited as the fountainhead of this cause. The parading exercises and commemorations in memory of Sun Tzu are just a few of the symbolic yet conspicuous attempts to emphasize the harmless intentions of China. As part of the same exercise, in 2006 president Hu Jintao offered silk copies of *The Art of War* to former US president George Bush.

A high degree of continuity can also be observed in the case of the United States. There are few other countries where strategic culture has been as consistent as in the US. After 1823, the Monroe Doctrine was established as

the norm of US foreign policy, establishing the separation of the US from Europe's complex geopolitical rivalries. Yet, the rationale behind it was equally rooted in geopolitical thinking: isolated and free of European mingling in the Western hemisphere, the US would be able to strengthen its ties with the south of the continent and limit the sphere of control of European colonial powers. For almost a century, the application of the Doctrine was undisturbed and contributed to the understanding of US foreign policy as isolationist.

The unique historical circumstances of the US equally gave rise to a sense of exceptionalism which became entrenched in US strategic culture. The essence of this narrative resides in middle-class individualistic and liberal values. US liberalism was from its founding moment premised on anti-statist norms and very weak working-class radicalism, lacking the kind of social hierarchies existent in European societies or the conservatism derived from a church/government alliance. America's 'exceptionalism' translated into a desire to transform the international system in the service of liberal democratic aspirations as it perceived it.

The upholding of liberal democratic values, respect for human rights and liberties and casualty aversion (especially post-Vietnam) have been the mainstays of US strategic culture and intervention rhetoric. The consolidation of these norms is rooted in the history and geopolitical situation of the United States. This ethos was preserved during the Cold War period and vigorously reasserted during the Clinton and Bush administrations. US strategies of foreign engagement and spreading Western-type democracy, combined with a diplomacy carried in the name of moral and legal principles (especially as justifications for war), have at times been incongruous with international law. The pragmatic and occasionally dismissive approach to international law has testified to the uneasy relationship between normative orders and the use of force, particularly concerning the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive war, as demonstrated in the controversial Iraq invasion in 2003. It is in these types of instances that the salience of a normative strategic culture is overwhelmingly evident.

Policy relevance

The study of strategic culture teaches us how to understand and interpret state and military action, how to locate particular manoeuvres in a wider historical context, and consequently, how to better predict state behavior. Strategic culture is not a dogma, nor a restrictive lens through which to look into the past or the future. It is a useful tool to comprehend how and what the circumstances are under which a state defines the appropriate means and ends to attain its security objectives. Strategic culture thus encompasses both what I call the emotionality of states (national pride and prestige) and the egoism of states (the pursuit of national interests). This approach brings a more holistic view to strategic culture because it accounts both for ideational variables and for the specific limitations encountered by states in the international system.

In the process of deconstructing this discourse, more space is created for a clearer account of history, a more realistic and moderate acceptance of one's past, friends and foes. Such introspection not only unveils states' sources of self-characterization, but deeply rooted anxieties, frustrations or aspirations. It also puts in place the premises of peace-building and a more stable international environment. Global anarchy and its implications can be mitigated if and when these perceptions are managed successfully. The policy relevance of strategic culture analysis is, therefore, to help interstate interaction take place in a climate of eased tensions and diminished prejudice.

At the same time, strategic culture is a reflection of a country's narration of its culture and history and, more often than not, critical to its state-building narratives. I do not advocate for an abandonment of the discourse of national unity but for a less hyperbolized and more moderate interpretation of the cumulative experiences and 'Others' that undergird respective national histories.

Reconciling Strategic Cultures with pragmatic national interests

In a global context of unprecedented mobility, instant connectivity, deepening interdependence, and transcultural issues that increasingly require transnational policy-making, it is time for political leadership to show more creativity and seek legitimacy from more constructive sources than from the continuous exclusion of Others. The

relevance of strategic culture persists today yet it should not imply, nor encourage, a deterministic understanding of state action, in which patterns of cooperation and enmity are preordained or inescapable.

It is also important to bear in mind that no strategic culture is unalterable or consistently revolving around a single narrative. Multiple national debates can run in parallel, developed around a main frame or line of interpretation. Strategic cultures are therefore dynamic and ever-evolving notions and understanding of a country's history and place in the world, often negotiated and re-assessed across generations. Nevertheless, despite such fluctuations, it is hard to disprove that countries maintain some persistent and recurrent visions of their security and geopolitical role, which transcend political parties and electoral cycles. The importance of strategic culture cannot be overlooked despite the fact that pragmatic pursuits and other strategic calculations often appear to be solely dictated by immediate interests.

It is a truism by now that we live in an era of globalization, when states are increasingly interconnected and interdependent, rendering notions of national interest, power and risks no longer exclusively defined within national boundaries. More and more, as economic and security interests rely on international and transnational forms of cooperation, states must reconcile their historical narratives with the realities of our times. Pragmatism must be accommodated within competitive frameworks, as the US-China relations have become in recent years.

Indeed, in today's world, zero-sum games must give way to a paradigm of multi-sum security, which encompasses the five dimensions of global security: national, transnational, human, environmental and transcultural security. Moreover, the pursuit of win-win solutions and of justice (both domestically and internationally) is not only desirable but increasingly serves realist state interests. Ideological incompatibilities, mistrust and historical divisions may remain among states but competition must be solved in a formula of symbiotic realism, which is attuned to the realities of an international scene with vast and complex interconnections, as well as multiple actors at sub- and trans-national and transcultural levels which often challenge the state itself.