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Lacunae in the Study of Culture in International Security

CHRISTOPHER P. TWOMEY

In the decade before the invasion of Iraq, the most important concepts in security studies for an American policy audience were the revolution in military affairs and transformation. Primarily due to the failures of that war and in Afghanistan and broader problems in the Middle East, *culture* has replaced these in the attentions of policymakers. Washington has been smitten by the idea that deeper understanding of cultural issues can reduce policy failures and advance national interests. This manifests most clearly in a range of recent policy documents from the Pentagon. Its recent Quadrennial Defense Review introduces a two-page section on the topic by arguing, 'Developing broader linguistic capability and cultural understanding is also critical to prevail in the long war and to meet 21st century challenges.'¹ The document mentions the importance of 'cultural' awareness a stunning 18 times. Consequently, the United States military has moved to increase its support for regional specialists in uniform ('foreign area officers' and their brethren), increased its support for language training, and is reaching out widely for academic expertise.

A different, but related, change has occurred in the academy. If the 1980s were the heyday of neorealism in international relations scholarship, by the late 1990s constructivism was laying siege to its dominance. Marked by important books edited by Peter Katzenstein and written by Alexander Wendt,² this period saw the ahistoric, acultural approach of the previous generation of theorizing called into question. Instead, constructivism's proponents argued for the constitutive role of socially constructed identities and the importance of shared ideas and practices. A recent survey of international relations professors has shown that constructivism is continuing its rise in the field.³ Simply referring to this literature as 'cultural' in nature grossly oversimplifies; beyond that, the constructivist literature prides itself on a degree of explicit methodological rigor that was absent in earlier 'area studies' work and problematizes such ideational constructs in ways earlier work did not. Nevertheless, clearly this literature is calling for increased understanding of comparative culture. Indeed, constructivism has provided something of a reprieve for area studies scholars against the onslaught of highly abstract international relations theorizing.⁴

Thus, for those students of security studies who – like this author – have invested in learning other languages and developing an understanding of other societies and their customs, these ought be heady times. Yet, there is a puzzle in the various literatures that use culture to examine security studies. On the one hand, those stressing the importance of an organizationally derived military culture are eminently persuasive.⁵ Similarly, explanations of variation in national identity that depend on constructed, ideational sources are also quite convincing.⁶ *On the other hand, the middle*

ground between these two types of work, the core of what is captured under the rubric of 'strategic culture', is flawed. This core takes national-level cultures and uses them to explain tendencies in national 'ways of war' or grand strategies, an approach that has great intuitive appeal.⁷ It has grown substantially, and some of its proponents have engaged in vigorous and sophisticated defences of the methodological challenges it faces. Unfortunately, as a group, this literature is plagued with overdetermined predictions (relative to simple, alternative theoretic approaches or material conditions), by explaining universal practices, and – in some cases – by politicized studies.

Strategic culture would potentially be valuable to a policymaker: if scholars can provide a map of how different national cultures think about the use of force, how they make war, etc., the promise for improving national security policy is great. However, if this core area is flawed, then the applicability of culture to security studies for policy relevant purposes will be much narrower. Given the renewed attention from policymakers on issues of culture, there is a danger that the scholarly acceptance of the other two areas – constructivism and organizational cultures – will offer verisimilitude to the problematic, traditional strategic culture work and the policy prescriptions drawn from it.

This article, then, has three aims. First, a typology of the various types of work relating cultural causes to strategic effects is developed. Second, to persuade the reader that there is a puzzle worth explaining, the relative merits of these various bodies of work are evaluated. Studies of national identity and military-organizational culture are shown to be strong and robust, yet the role of a similar independent variable – culture – to other effects is shown to be tenuous. Thereafter, the article explains this failure by identifying the reasons this pattern of validity in cultural work in security studies – a lacuna between two flourishing research programs – occurs.

Existing Work on Culture in Security Studies

How should one bound the literature under study here? This is not a trivial question; the intersection between studies 'cultural' and those on 'security' is large. This article will accept an expansive view and consider all research that addresses both. Throughout, it will focus on the way that culture, as an independent variable, shapes security behaviour, the dependent variable. (As such, it remains explicitly positivist in its outlook, siding with Iain Johnston in his debates with Colin Gray.⁸) For analytic clarity, it is useful to reserve the term strategic culture for a subset of this broader field of research.

While there is much interesting sociological, anthropological, and organizational work on the way in which various types of cultures form and are changed, that issue will not be considered here. Those studies problematize culture itself, treating it as the dependent variable. That is a worthy task, but not mine. Rather, this article will evaluate the way different types of cultures shape issues in security studies.

As is discussed below, the range of strategic behaviour that culture has been used to explain is quite large, ranging from the tactical predispositions of specific military services, to broader strategic preferences of a nation or military, to the broadest

national interests and international security norms. None of these are excluded from the conceptual survey below, and indeed explaining the variation among the quality of work across this spectrum of related literatures is the focus of this article.

Due to differences in both dependent and independent variables, I argue this broad field can be divided usefully into three categories: the article begins discussing those that draw upon military organizational cultures, then examines the core of traditional strategic culture work, and concludes with those that strive to explain national (security) identities. Each of these has developed independently, although there is some interaction, and intersection, among them. The next sections discuss each in turn.

Military Culture and Operational Effects

At the lowest level of analysis, there is a literature that looks at organizational, rather than national, cultures. This literature originates – or more precisely, builds on – the rise of scholarly interest in organizations per se sparked by classic studies of bureaucracy.⁹ These are generally used to explain operational or even tactical preferences or tendencies, instead of broader ‘ways of war’ or even grand strategies. Thus, it differs in both independent and dependent variables from the literatures in sections below.

In one classic work in this field, Builder examines the different cultures within the various military services within the United States that have shaped what sort of military missions the services emphasize, and which they avoid.¹⁰ Legro has examined the way in which specific military-organizational cultures shape what is considered appropriate military strategy, looking at cases of chemical warfare, submarine warfare against commerce, and strategic bombing in World War II.¹¹ Kier links domestic political debates to the strategic preferences of the military in France and Britain before the same war.¹² Hull argues that the nature of the German military, consistently over nearly a hundred-year period, shaped its operational strategy regarding slaughter and other forms of military extremism.¹³ Lynn Eden links the irrationally large nuclear arsenals of the Cold War to biases that stem from organizational politics within the scientific and analytic communities affiliated to the US Air Force that systematically underestimated the destructive potential of firestorms.¹⁴ King argues that the density of the social groups making up the British officer corps lead to a particularly efficient flexibility in implementing doctrine in operations, and contrasts that with German and France.¹⁵ This author’s own work examines the way military doctrines shape perception of military threats and assessment of the military balance in Sino-American and Arab–Israeli conflicts.¹⁶

In each of these arguments, *both* the dependent variable and independent variable are smaller in scale than in the ‘traditional’ strategic cultural literature. The independent variable is typically clearly distinct from other literatures and focuses on cultural factors within a particular organization: either a single nation’s military or a particular service within it rather than on national cultural traits. Furthermore, while there is some blurring at the edges on the dependent variable, this literature generally explains a narrower form of policy than the ‘traditional’ strategic culture. These works typically focus on tactical and operational practices rather than grand strategy.

They are not predicting general competencies in broad areas of warfare, but rather specific sorts of policy: avoidance of certain types of weapons (Legro), choice of specific operational strategies (Kier), ignoring certain pieces of readily obtainable data (Eden and Twomey), and conducting certain types of offensive operations (Hull).

Culture and Grand Strategy: 'Traditional' Strategic Culture

The traditional strategic culture literature connects deeply held, national cultural practices and beliefs to the selection of grand strategy, both in its military and political elements. This is a large, multifaceted literature. The early work focused typically on the military elements of a grand strategy. It generally addressed effects that were more large-scale in nature than tactics, although the line between operational strategy and military facets of a grand strategy is admittedly imprecise.

Jack Snyder and Colin Gray pioneered this traditional literature in the late 1970s.¹⁷ Snyder argued for the importance of strategic culture in the nuclear realm:

Strategic culture can be defined as the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy. In the area of strategy, habitual behavior is largely cognitive behavior.¹⁸

For Snyder, these ideational constructs and received history predisposed the Soviets to an offensive and preemptive form of nuclear doctrine.

In his early work, Gray suggests that the (poor) quality of American strategic analysis in general is a function of its particular strategic culture. He argued that, historically, the United States has had an 'astrategic' strategic culture. However, starting from the 1960s, he charted a shift to a more thoughtful, although still misguided in his assessment, form of analysis. This was characterized by an optimistic view of strategic stability and the utility of arms control, and a pessimism regarding the ability to control nuclear war (and therefore to plan for it).¹⁹ In later writings, Gray steps back to describe a broad view of the role of culture, arguing that it provides the context for strategic action.²⁰

This style of argument – connecting culture to specific, broad military strategies or practices – has many adherents among contemporary Sinologists; for instance, Newmeyer explains the Chinese backwardness in airpower to Taoist and imperial era cultural norms.²¹ Pillsbury links Sun Tsu's writings to contemporary Chinese strategic practices.²² Whiting stresses the emphasis in China on preemption and seizing the initiative.²³

More generally, however, the recent strategic culture literature has broadened somewhat to explain perceptions regarding utility of violence in general for achieving national aims, the merits of multilateralism versus unilateralism, and the importance of international law for individual countries. Such studies investigate the cultural origins of a liberal versus an offensive realist outlook on world politics, for instance.²⁴ This work is a bit broader than that Snyder and Gray pioneered: rather

than addressing the way that military force is used within a particular conflict, this literature steps back to assess the sources of choices about political-military strategies for thriving within international affairs. Nevertheless, it links national cultures to grand strategic choices. If the earlier strategic culture literature focused on the military side of grand strategy, much of the contemporary work centres on the political, or political-military, side of grand strategy.

This burgeoning literature increasingly dominates contemporary publications on strategic culture. Some of its earliest work focused on the distinctive Japanese and German foreign policies in the cold war.²⁵ Building on this foundation, other work in the strategic culture tradition is notable for its positivist methodological practices. In *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*,²⁶ Johnston lays out a research design that allows for replicability and reduces the prospect for politicized or selective coding of any particular cultural trait.²⁷ He argues that traditional views of China as a legalistic, pacifist culture are flawed. Other scholars of China also emphasize similar elements of Chinese strategic culture: Scobell, too finds evidence for a rather 'offensive realist' form of behaviour, albeit one concealed behind a more benign rhetoric. It is, he says, 'a worldview that rationalizes the use of force, even when used in an offensive capacity, as a purely defensive measure'.²⁸

Today, much work continues in this vein. For instance, Matlary and Meyer in separate articles suggest that an emerging European-wide strategic culture will in general be predisposed against the use of force and in favour of multilateralism.²⁹ Legro charts the change in American views regarding international involvement more generally.³⁰ Others compare the evolution of Canadian and Australian views on these issues.³¹

In all these cases, the dependent variables exist at a broad level: conceptions of the best combinations of political and military tools to achieve national interests in the international arena. The imputed source of this behaviour is a culture that resides within the nation as a whole.

Constructing National Identity

Finally, a third, large literature studies the way that culture shapes national interests at a broad level. Works in this area address issues such as the desirability of close relations with different areas of the world, what geographic areas are considered part of the national territory and what are not, and what is a nation's purpose in the international sphere. These dependent variables are even larger in scale than those considered in the traditional strategic culture literatures (although again, there is some overlap). Rather than focusing on what geopolitical strategies might best achieve a given set of interests, this literature explains the cultural sources of those interests. The strategic culture literature centres on the strategy, whereas the national identity literature describes the goals that strategy serves. The sources of culture used as explanatory variables in this literature include both those that reside within a nation, as in the strategic culture literature, but also those that transcend a single nation-state and exist in some manifestation of international society.

This is one manifestation of the broader rise of the constructivism, drawing on methodology from sociology and sharing some of critical theory's concerns about generalizable theory.³²

Several works fall in this literature. Hopf dissects the nature of Russian and Soviet identity with regard to its relations with other countries on the basis of their Slavic ethnicity, adherence to communist ideals, and great power stature.³³ Mendeloff describes Russia's perceptions of the Baltics as internal to the Russian identity at the end of the cold war.³⁴ Brown describes how identity politics have been shaped in Taiwan, and Zhao discusses the importance of that in China's own national identity.³⁵ More broadly, Risse-Kappen argues for the importance of 'a modified domestic structure approach incorporating long-held worldviews embedded in the political culture'.³⁶ Scholars have found similar explanations for America's predisposition to export democracy, and Maoist China's propensity to export revolution.³⁷ Others also emphasize the importance of normative sources of territorial disputes.³⁸ Crawford traces the way moral debates shaped many national views about the merits of colonialism.³⁹ Other scholars also examine the role of international social norms on shaping the practices of international affairs regarded as commonplace throughout the international system (indeed, that constitute the system).⁴⁰

Thus, the literatures on culture in security studies are wide-ranging. The three literatures that are mentioned above constitute relatively distinct groupings, albeit with some grey areas at the margins. The chart below represents these visually. A large number of authors working on the role of culture in international security are located on the chart according to the nature of her or his research. Each is coded by the location of the culture s/he examines as the independent variable and by the sort of effect that culture is predicted to have.

As suggested in the three sections above, these scholars cluster rather than being uniformly distributed across the range of possibilities. Thus, there is a distinct grouping circled in the upper left of the chart that corresponds to the organizational culture theorists. They all are located near the top of the chart, as befits their narrow independent variable. The coherence of these theorists on the dependent variable side of the equation is lower, although there is a core focusing narrowly on tactical and operational doctrine. The authors circled on the bottom right compose the national interests literature. The culture in their independent variables is typically at the level of states or the international system, and the dependent variable they are explaining is primarily in the realm of national interests. Finally, in the centre of the chart is the core strategic culture literature. Its independent variable is similar to that of the bottom right literature and is found at the level of nation-states. However, the dependent variable is centred on explaining nation's grand-strategic choices.

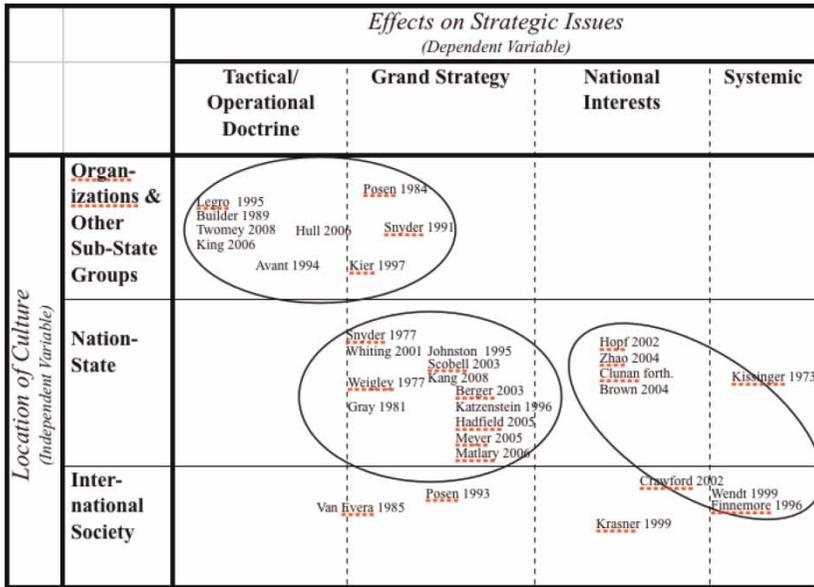
Undoubtedly, the chart could be populated further; indeed, some of the articles cited in this article are not included. However, it is unlikely that the clustering effect would disappear. Similarly, one could identify subsets of these literatures, or find other ways to parse the distribution. Yet the core similarities identified in the sections above do provide a useful typology for this broad area of the role of culture in the study of international security.

Having categorized the culture in strategic studies field into three distinct literatures, this article now turns to briefly assess the quality of each.

Evaluation

This section argues that the middle grouping, which traditionally is viewed as the locus of ‘strategic culture’, is flawed. Three primary concerns limit the utility of the traditional strategic cultural literature. First, many of its predictions are overdetermined. Second, there are substantial empirical failings of existing strategic cultural work. Third, there remains an unresolved epistemological debate about the role of causality in the study of strategic culture. In contrast, this section also highlights

FIGURE 1
CULTURE IN STRATEGIC STUDIES
WHERE DOES IT RESIDE, AND WHAT DOES IT INFLUENCE?



Note: The author would like to recognize Elizabeth Stone and, particularly, Anne Clunan, for their assistance in conceiving and developing this chart.

Sources: In addition to studies cited elsewhere in this article, the following are referenced here: Stephen Van Evera, ‘The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War’, in Steven E. Miller (ed.), *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War: An International Security Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Barry R. Posen, ‘Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power’, *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1993); Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored; Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1973); Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Anne L. Clunan, *Reconstructing Grandeur: Identity and the Sources of Russian Security Policy* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, forthcoming); David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007).

the merits of the other sorts of work highlighted in the chart above, and concludes by noting a telling shift away from strategic culture by some of its earliest proponents.

Overdetermined Outcomes

The traditional strategic culture theories frequently fail to offer novel, replicable insights. Some make predictions that are consistent with existing theoretical paradigms, such as realism, or a particular variant of it – offensive realism.⁴¹ For instance, as has been much commented upon, Johnston and Scobell find that China behaves . . . just as neorealism would predict!⁴² A Chinese cultural realism may be accurate, but there are likely many explanations for it. Similarly, others emphasize a culturally derived practice of strategic deception, as if that too did not have rationalist foundations.⁴³

At a related level, studies of postwar Japanese pacifism have served as an important foundation for this literature.⁴⁴ However, several authors have highlighted the explicability of such policies given Japan's unique geo-strategic position during the cold war: an island nation with a superpower ally.⁴⁵ These studies find both Japanese cold war behaviour and its recent reforms to be entirely consistent with various forms of realist behaviour.⁴⁶

Others make very broad-level characterizations that are easily explained by geography and material conditions. For instance, Kang's recent book argues that Korea and Vietnam, among others, are comfortable with Chinese leadership of the Asian international system for cultural reasons.⁴⁷ Although this book is admirable for its call to focus more attention on the specifics of Asian international affairs, this empirical claim is one that realists have no trouble explaining: weak states near strong ones are prone to bandwagoning.⁴⁸

For instance, Snyder argues that ideational constructs and received history predisposed the Soviets to an offensive and preemptive form of nuclear doctrine (Whiting makes the same claim for China, albeit in conventional terms).⁴⁹ While such a predisposition would certainly be relevant to policy, the historic source of the culture in the Russian case – frequent invasion – is a common trait and not one that seems particularly unique. Consider the current American 'predisposition' to offensive and preemptive, or rather preventive, war; this was the result of a single attack of moderate scale. If strategic culture is that malleable, it is likely not particularly useful as an explanatory variable. Indeed, some would argue that the post-9/11 era is not particularly unique in American history. If this is the case, and if the vastly different histories of the United States and Russia lead to similar historic tendencies at this level of military grand strategy, again the utility of the strategic cultural approach must be questioned.⁵⁰ Further, if Russia, China, and the United States all exhibit this trait, why must we rely on nationally based, cultural explanations to understand it?

In another cases, the United States is said to be good at naval warfare or it tends to favour technology over manpower. (National preferences for attritional warfare would also fall into this category.) Again, material explanations would seem adequate, and more parsimonious, explanations for such tendencies.

Still other articles focus on a nation's belief in its own uniqueness or distinctiveness alone.⁵¹ However, since most nations believe this, and the implication of this is a banal admonition to learn more about other cultures, this is not particularly constructive. Finally, some address issues of the utility of force in general, or specifically with regard to offensive, defensive, or signalling purposes.⁵² However, shifts in perceptions of the utility of force often seem to swing well beyond the confines of individual national cultures.⁵³

In all these cases, strategic culture is either explaining overdetermined variation or – through lack of comparative work – making predictions based on unique cultural variables for behaviours that are commonplace in the international system. In neither case is this literature as a whole offering useful policy prescriptions. Strategic culture, to be successful, should make unique predictions, particularly given its onerous demands violating the goal of parsimony in social science.

Empirical Failures

In a number of instances where the strategic culture literature does make unique predictions, they simply fail to accord with the historic record. The review above highlighted the proliferation of articles on a legalistic and less aggressive strategic culture in various European states.⁵⁴ However, when the expectations of that literature are compared to what is actually occurring in defence policy (rather than pundits' rhetoric) in these states, the behaviour is found to be significantly consistent with structural realism:

[T]he Europeans are hard balancing in the traditional realist way of balancing internally and externally to generate military capability. Though Europe has decreased its defense spending since the end of the Cold War, the wealthier European states have increasingly oriented their defense spending on capabilities that are analogous to those of the United States. They are emulating the capabilities of the most potent power. And the European states have balanced externally: under the auspices of the European Union, they have assembled a military coalition with both regional and global aspirations.⁵⁵

Similarly, reading Gray's evaluation of the US 'astrategic culture' today, one is struck at how narrowly he characterizes the broader flow of strategic debates in the nuclear era in the United States. These views certainly represented one view in Washington (and elsewhere), but never did these go uncontested nor were these strategic ideas widely implemented by military practitioners.⁵⁶ That is, *this was but one strategic culture competing for acceptance* in the United States at the time. The article returns to this important theme below.

This author has conducted a pair of studies investigating the potential for strategic culture to explain contemporary Chinese foreign policy in two areas: North Korea policy and nuclear strategy.⁵⁷ In both areas, it is clear there are a range of different strategic themes that are deeply held in Chinese culture that might plausibly shape Chinese behaviour in these cases concerning preferences such as first strikes, tolerance of hierarchy in international affairs, preference for defensive strategies in

general, etc. However, it is also clear from that research that these themes have not shaped Chinese policy in these two areas in any meaningful way. These should be easy tests for strategic culture, and the approach's failures here are damning. Other studies of Chinese and East Asian strategic culture also come up wanting: Kang's survey of East Asian international relations from this perspective has been subject to empirical critiques.⁵⁸

While these failings are significant, they do highlight an important point that often goes under-appreciated: strategic culture work can be subject to three-cornered tests. It can be falsified. It is to the approach's credit that this is the case.⁵⁹ However, the results of these tests are not inspiring.

Strategic Culture: Causal or Context?

Gray admonishes scholars to treat 'strategic culture as context'. Again, this has enormous intuitive appeal, and many cosmopolitan analysts would echo an appeal for added awareness of global differences. However, this is still leaves unexplained how one might benefit from understanding this context. While polarized arguments about positivism and interpretivism are indeed not constructive, assertions that 'what we are really trying to generate, or must at least content ourselves with, is some modicum of "explicative understanding"' 'dodge the issue of whether strategic culture can be used predictively.⁶⁰ It is eminently plausible that culture might legitimate some behaviour and delegitimize others. However, this bromide should be used to make contingent prescriptions if it is actually true. Specifically *what* choices for *which* nations are beyond the pale? This sort of explicit statement of cultural effects is rarely done.

Indeed, leading practitioners would like to have it both ways. For Gray, the specific forms of behaviour that are constrained or shaped by this context are extremely broad: 'For example, for reasons that one can at least ultimately call cultural, the United States is relatively poor at the conduct of special operations, whereas Israel, Britain, and the former USSR, are relatively competent.'⁶¹ Later in the same piece, he writes that German and Russian strategic cultures limit their excellence at surface warfare at sea. These general statements strongly imply predictive conclusions. However, such broad-brush statements are easily explained by the material constraints of the nations in question, a point that Gray does not dispute. Further, Gray himself argues that in other cases, similar scale competencies can be changed:

But, it is not much of an exaggeration to claim that the twentieth was Britain's continental century. The point of the British illustration is to suggest that reasonably well-led states have strategic cultures that are adaptable to changing, and often deeply unwelcome, political and strategic contexts.⁶²

Here, Gray's writing is internally inconsistent. He is strongly suggesting a constraining, and therefore explanatory role, for strategic culture, while at the same time presenting his findings as descriptive and malleable. Further, as discussed in a previous section, given the malleability of these cultures in Gray's eyes, and the availability of

alternate explanations, the utility of culturally based explanations for these competencies seems limited.

If strategic culture is not capable of being used to predict likely future policy of actors, then its leading proponents should be very explicit about this, and indeed should criticize those who attempt to do so. Rather than doing so, the more philosophic contributions in these literatures skirt the issue by welcoming the attention from Washington today, and criticizing positivist polemicists at the same time.⁶³ Washington is not interested in strategic culture because it edifies policymakers about dead history. The attraction is the promise of better understanding of how tomorrow's world works. If the proponents of strategic culture truly believe they cannot contribute in that regard, they should be public in their rejection of policymakers' interest.

Evolution in Original Generation of Scholars

Indeed, as we consider the policy applicability of strategic cultural work, it is interesting that a number of its most prominent early academic proponents have shifted in one direction or another. This is evidence, circumstantial to be sure, of limitations in the literature's approach. Snyder has moved toward a more anthropological set of approaches to culture and broadened away from explaining narrow strategic choices to issues of more general war-proneness.⁶⁴ Johnston finds more value in studying the contribution of supranational forms of culture to security studies.⁶⁵

Gray remains supportive of the original concept, although at times he too counsels deep caution about both social science's applicability to the topic and its utility to policymakers. A series of quotes from a recent article of Gray's highlight his own epistemological pessimism:

I suspect that scholarship on strategic culture . . . is bound to fail when it ventures far beyond our culture-bound common sense and positivistically seeks a certain general wisdom. . . .

I admit that it is more than moderately difficult to design a theory of strategic culture if the elusive beast, culture, is both input and output, presumed cause and presumed consequence. But, so what! . . .

Practical people, a category that should include strategists, will ask that most brutally direct of questions, 'so what?' So what do we do with greater self-, and other-, cultural understanding? Culture matters greatly, but so do the other dimensions of war, peace, and strategy.⁶⁶

Gray does not propose an answer to the damning 'so what?' question he poses. His pessimism about our ability to make use of 'traditional' strategic culture ought sound a cautionary note to policymakers and analysts alike. Without something approaching a general theory (probabilistic, to be sure), the insights derived from this literature are likely to be edifying, but of limited utility to policymakers.

It is instructive that those who have addressed this topic with the most social science rigor or who have engaged in its defence the longest, have themselves

shifted their position on its applicability to policymaking. Unfortunately, recent entrants to the field have too often ignored this shift.

Value at the Peripheries of Strategic Culture

The above critiques centre on the middle strand in the literature as identified in the previous section (the cultural sources of political and military grand strategies, i.e., the traditional strategic culture literature). The other literatures, those based on organizational cultures and those explaining national interests, are much less vulnerable to these critiques.

In the former literature, the predictions offered are distinct from those made by realist or other materialist focused approaches. Indeed, some form of a Waltzian neorealism is generally taken as the explicit foil of those works.⁶⁷ In each case, the predicted – and observed – behaviour deviates from those predicted by a materialist, realist conception but accords with the military-organizational culture's prediction. These are each relatively strong 'three cornered' tests, in Lakatosian terms, emphasizing the methodological rigor of this body of work.⁶⁸ For instance, Keir outlines domestic political structures that are likely to impede optimal strategy formulation, and Legro points to organizational practices that would proscribe certain sorts of military tactics; in both these cases the 'rational' strategy is the foil.⁶⁹ It is rare that this is done explicitly in the core strategic culture literatures, perhaps because scholars in that tradition are often comparativists specializing in a single country and area studies experts rather than specialists in the (comparative) study of grand strategy or security studies.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the policy implications in this literature are often explicit: organizations will have specifiable predispositions, and competitors can adjust their policy accordingly.

While systematically evaluating the literature on cultural sources of national interests goes well beyond the aspirations of this paper, several factors attest to its quality. It is essentially the core of paradigmatic constructivist literature, whose justified rise within the field was charted at the outset of the article.⁷¹ While this is not to suggest by any means that this literature is accepted as dominant, its methodological rigor and clear implications set it apart from other critical approaches. While the strands of constructivism that question the degree to which ideational factors can constrain material power are heavily contested, those describing national interests are much more widely accepted. In particular, the meticulous empirical grounding of characterizations of national interest in works by authors such as Hopf and Brown provides a robustness to their coding that is lacking in much of the strategic cultural work.⁷² Ofttimes strategic culture work lacks the self-conscious attention to methodology that has allowed constructivism to flourish. Instead, the core variable of a nation's strategic culture incorporates contemporary domestic politics, economic factors, and other factors without precision about which matters under what circumstances.⁷³

Similarly, rigor in discussing the ways in which culture is conveyed and changes across time is critical for assessing its contributions to policy in different eras. This is a hallmark of the best work on national identity formation.⁷⁴ Cultural change is

problematized, and its repositories – elites, educational systems, narratives in literature or other media – are made explicit. Such precision about definitions and an explicit methodology for coding is vital for knowledge cumulation and the replicability of findings across different researchers.

Thus, this article has painted a picture of robust work at the edge of what is traditionally considered strategic culture, with weaker work at the core of it. What then accounts for this lacuna in the utility of culture for understanding security? The final section offers explores several answers.

Explaining Variation in the Utility of Culture to Security Studies

Several important differences among these various bodies of literature exist. This final section argues that differences in two factors cause this pattern of a useful perimeter of the literature with a weaker centre. One pertains to the independent variable, the other to the dependent variable. In the former, the number of competing cultural themes varies across the different literatures. That is, the different repositories of culture have different degrees of contestation regarding their cultural norms. Second, the relevance and intensity of the crucible of international competition varies across the literatures, allowing other factors to dominate the various dependent variables in some cases. Together these pressures interact, squeezing the strategic culture literature and greatly reducing its explanatory power.

Multiple Repositories of Culture

While each body of work draws on socially held, ideational constructs, the relevant social groups are different for each of the literatures in ways that matter for the influence that culture might have. A single organization's culture, particularly a rigid and hierarchical organization like a military, is likely to be particularly cohesive and unified. Organizations create standard operating procedures to function effectively, and have explicit and formalized means of enforcing conformity (promotion, exclusion, education, etc.) that nations lack. This will make identifying and characterizing the culture of an organization much easier for the analyst. It also means that a single culture can monopolize the ideational input to decisions and perceptions, rather than having to compete with multiple competing strands of cultural identity.

In contrast, most nations have a plethora of different national cultural themes that compete and interact throughout different elements of society. These are unlikely to coalesce on issues of national security. Rather, multiple voices will compete in identifying the 'true' heritage of a national strategic culture, and leaders can choose among these to legitimate choices taken for other reasons.⁷⁵ Even in cases where one strand of national culture is powerful, its dominance is likely to be less pronounced than a military organizational culture, where organizational structures, promotions opportunities, etc. can reify its unity. *This should lead the effects of a military-organizational culture to be more clear-cut and more pronounced than for the other forms of (national) culture that might affect security studies issues.*

While this helps to explain the differences between the military-organizational culture literature and the traditional strategic culture literature, the constructivist

literature on national identity formation also looks at national culture as its source. Should it not then suffer the same limitations as the traditional strategic culture literature? To some extent, the answer is simply 'yes.' When evaluating the constructivist literature on national identity formation, however, one is struck by the modesty of claims and the awareness of competing threads of identity. For instance, this literature typically emphasizes the existence of multiple competing threads of culture in existence at any one time, competing with each other for adherents as they change their own nature over time. Simply, contestation of such social identities is central to most sophisticated descriptive accounts of culture.⁷⁶ Hopf, one of the finest examples of this field, identifies five different themes in his evaluation of Soviet identity in 1955 and four in 1999.⁷⁷ His restraint in synthesizing these is frustrating to many a reader, but likely a truer representation of reality than the alternative.

Beyond that, and in part due to this point, the constructivist literature on national identity is predominantly explanatory rather than predictive. The authors working in this vein typically eschew making firm or even probabilistic predictions about the future. Some in this literature avoid prioritizing the different sources of identity, rather being content with identifying the full panoply of sources. Others would emphasize precisely the historic contingency of the development of a particular nation's identity, noting the challenges in taking one particular explanation beyond the case for which it was developed. Thus, although this literature does achieve success, it is success on its own, narrow terms. Indeed, the series of quotations cited above from Gray's 2007 work suggests he is heading in that direction, but he would not go as far as to explicitly exclude any predictive utility, as do some constructivists.⁷⁸ But this is precisely the danger: if strategic culture theorists are on the same 'contingent', context-dependent methodological ground that constructivists occupy, then they need to acknowledge that their intellectual contribution is more in the realm of epistemology vice policy prescription. That is not to deny the utility of increased understanding of epistemology, but merely to note that it is not what policymakers are asking for, and it can be misused too easily by them.

Crucible of Conflict

The role of 'the crucible of conflict' as an alternate influence on policy also helps to explain the variation in utility of the different groups of literatures discussed in this article. The three literatures posit causal chains to explain different dependent variables – tactical/operational doctrine, political and military grand strategy, and national interests – that are each relevant to states' ability to survive, and potentially thrive, in the international system. Of course, each of these is subject to other influences as well; in particular, material constraints also play a role.

However, in the first two literatures, this material pressure is heavier and more focused. The choice of military strategies or the selection of a grand strategy to link means to ends are both issues for which states have a strong incentive to find the approach most likely to succeed, not that which is most likely to support a

given ideational construct. Particularly in the areas of tactics and strategy, the 'cruible of conflict' is central. Tactics and strategies that disadvantage will have great and direct costs in blood and treasure. A policy selected for predominantly cultural reasons in either case will be proven wrong by the material realities of conflict. In battle, the ideational factors face clear-cut evidence from the adversary and the result of conflict.⁷⁹ Preferences in these two areas that were driven by cultural dynamics will have their limitations laid bare.

This is less the case for the cultural origins of broad national interests literature. There, the connection between the idea and success in international competition is most tenuous. While the costs of a war begun by a cultural bias for first strikes are clear, the implications of a Russian identity that situates itself in Europe rather than Asia, for instance, is less straightforward.

Relatedly, interests are more fundamental to conceptions of identity (and therefore more immutable) than are strategies to achieve those interests. Questions of 'who we are' and how do we understand our place in world are more fundamental than are questions of 'how ought we secure that place in the world'. The latter presupposes the former, and indeed this is a point of agreement across wide divides. Both Waltz and Wendt agree: 'It is important here to distinguish between micro- and macro-level structures, between what Waltz causes the domains of "foreign policy" and "international politics".'⁸⁰ For Wendt, the macro-level structures are primarily determined by ideas and culture; for Waltz international politics is shaped by distributions of material capabilities. However for both, actual policy is shaped by myriad other factors. Similarly, for social identity theory, social purpose is often an element of identity, but it too describes goals, not the specific strategies to achieve them.⁸¹ In all these cases, the strongest causal arguments are made for the broader element of identity within a system, rather than the narrower policies to advance that identity.

Thus, the causal effect of cultural sources from the first two literatures (organizational culture and strategic culture *per se*) are likely to have less behavioural consequences as compared to the final (national interest) literature. Material causes will play a relatively larger role in the first two than in the third.

Taken together then, the previous two sections suggest the causal chain at the core of the strategic culture literature is squeezed from two sides. In contrast to the narrower work on organization culture, strategic culture (and the constructivist literature on national interests) suffers from a multiplicity of competing national cultures with lessons for international security strategies. On the other hand, when such ideas shape policy in tactical or strategic affairs, they receive feedback as spilled blood and wasted treasure that is directly attributable to policy choices; the broader conception of national interests is harder to link to such feedback. Therefore, the cultural ideas shaping strategic (and tactical) choices are pressured toward optimal strategies. Thus, despite the stronger link between culture and security variables at either end, the effect of national cultures on strategic affairs in the middle is weak. It is subject to each problem, material pressures and the multiplicity of cultures. This helps to account for the empirical limitations of the strategic culture literature as outlined in earlier sections.

Conclusion

As currently developing, weaknesses in the strategic culture project leave it poorly equipped to serve policy needs. These are substantial shortcomings, and their causes are not likely to be easily redressed. More dangerously, strategic culture too often emphasizes stereotypical views of other cultures and ignores the nuance of political institutions, geostrategic context, and specific leaders. Two possible remedies exist. In the first, strategic culture might follow in the footsteps of the constructivist literature on identity formation, eschewing prediction and focusing on explaining past strategic preferences. However, what is notable about the constructivist literature is its diligence in engaging methodological debates. Strategic culture work has done this only rarely. Engagement in such debates would be beneficial for the field of strategic culture, laying the groundwork for cumulation of knowledge. However, moving in this direction would also require inherently an overt move away from claiming relevance to contemporary policy debates in the near term.

The second path would be even more challenging. Were strategic culture theorists to acknowledge more often the existence of many competing strategic cultures in individual polities, empirical accuracy would be achieved. However, this would then turn those analysts' attention to models of domestic politics that intermediate between different competing cultures. That is, if there are three rival cultures addressing a particular country's broad strategic outlook, then the relevant political institutions will determine how those cultures shape policy. Understanding these institutions would be as important as understanding the underlying cultures that they intermediate among.⁸² Such an approach may be productive, but it rapidly becomes complex and draws – primarily – on different literatures than those on which strategic culture traditionally focuses.

To the extent strategic culture has pointed our attentions towards the importance of understanding specific cases rather than focusing solely on abstract generic theories of international relations, it has achieved notable success. Understanding the relevant political institutions, identifying the primary societal actors and elites, and recognizing the constraints and payoffs that motivate action all require specific knowledge of a case. Indeed, one might accurately refer to this as cultural knowledge. However, this is not the same as identifying deeply held cultural predispositions for a particular strategic behaviour.

Despite the success of some historical case work on individual strategic culture in individual countries and eras, however, policy-relevant work on the subject remains problematic. While constructivism has raised the profile of academically rigorous work on culture in general, and the military-organizational culture literature has developed important prescriptive conclusions, each of these literatures has important differences from most existing work on strategic culture. Nevertheless, the strategic culture literature, as it is traditionally conceived, has inappropriately gained legitimacy from the successes of similarly situated work on military-organizational cultures and constructivist national identity. Until strategic cultural work addresses the methodological, theoretical, and empirical problems identified above, it should be relegated to the second tier of research priorities, perhaps locked in an ivory

tower away from the seductions of influencing policymakers. Other work, more amenable to generalization on important policy relevant questions (like military-organizational culture, but also domestic politics, fine-grained power realism, etc.) deserves scholarly and national attention instead.

Disclaimer

This article does not represent the official position of the US Navy nor other US government agencies.

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