

## Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back\*

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Abstract. 'Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back' takes the scholarly argument about the study, and meaning, of strategic culture to a new stage. Specifically, this article is a direct reply to recent criticisms of so-called first-generation theorists of strategic culture. The author reconsiders both the subject of strategic culture, and what he first wrote about it fifteen and more years ago. He finds that although there is noteworthy room for improvement in what he wrote then, the recent theorising by Alastair Iain Johnston, in particular, rests upon a misunderstanding of the nature, character, and 'working' of strategic culture. Of particular note is the insistence by Johnston on a separation of ideas from behaviour, for the dominant purpose of developing falsifiable theory. 'Strategic Culture as Context,' therefore, revisits in some detail questions of definition, with particular reference to the ideas-behaviour nexus. The article proceeds both to register arguments that should advance understanding of how strategic culture 'works,' and to suggest a better set of discriminators, different perspectives, for better consideration of evidence of strategic culture. Overall, the article suggests that strategic culture provides context for understanding, rather than explanatory causality for behaviour.

Three generations of scholars in rapid succession have addressed the concept of strategic culture.<sup>1</sup> In minor part this article is a critical commentary upon third-generation scholarship by a representative of the first generation. In major part, however, the article is a belated development of first-generation enquiry. The analysis proceeds from a reexamination of vital matters of theory, through explanation of the postulated universality and ubiquity of culturally stamped behaviour, to an attempt to chart a better way forward in research. The discussion addresses the connection between strategic culture and strategic behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> The postulate of three generations is offered by Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Thinking about Strategic Culture,' *International Security*, 19 (1995), pp. 36–43; *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), pp. 4–22; 'Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China,' in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York, 1996), pp. 221–22, n.8. Although the generations overlap, the peak of their intellectual activity respectively can be associated primarily with the late 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s. It is worth mentioning that gathering together even all of these 'generations' would make only a small party. Whereas first generation scholars by and large were looking for a more Russian, and Soviet, USSR, than contemporary policy and strategic theory recognised, second generation scholars sought the cunning coded messages behind the language of strategic studies, while the third generation appears primarily to be interested in researchability. The current, or third, wave of cultural theorising has many elements. In a recent article, Michael C. Desch identifies four strands as dominant: 'organizational, political, strategic, and global.' 'Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies,' *International Security*, 23 (1998), p. 142.

There is a sharp difference of view between such third-generation theorists as Iain Johnston and first-generation theorists such as this author, over what comprises the proper domain of culture and possibly, though less certainly, over how culture may shape impulses to act. At the very least, the time is overdue for debate to be joined. The subject of strategic culture matters deeply because it raises core questions about the roots of, and influences upon, strategic behaviour. By strategic behaviour, this author means behaviour relevant to the threat or use of force for political purposes. I will argue that recent (third-generation) scholarship on strategic culture is seriously in error in its endeavour to distinguish culture from behaviour. Nonetheless, that error has been committed for the praiseworthy reason of finding reasonable tests for the influence of culture. Furthermore, we of the first generation of scholarship on strategic culture, though, I believe, fundamentally correct in our understanding of the subject, could be insufficiently critical of the friction that intervenes between cultural preference and behaviour.

So limited is the empirical and theoretical scholarship currently available on strategic culture, that we would probably be best advised to look more for complementarities of approach, than to try and elect one or another view the methodological winner. Strategic culture should be approached both as a shaping context for behaviour and itself as a constituent of that behaviour. The theoretical, let alone empirical, difficulties raised by the latter approach obviously are severe. Readers could do a lot worse than consider this discussion of strategic culture with reference to the key distinction drawn by Martin Hollis and Steve Smith between ‘explaining and understanding international relations.’<sup>2</sup> To clarify, one can think of strategic culture as being ‘out there’ as a rich and distilled source of influence which might ‘cause’ behaviour. Alternatively, or perhaps just in addition, one can regard strategic culture as being in good measure socially constructed by both people and institutions, which proceed to behave to some degree culturally.

The methodologically awesome qualifier ‘to some degree,’ is the nub of the problem. It is not the case, however, that to see all strategic behaviour as culturally influenced behaviour is to explain everything and therefore to explain nothing. There is vastly more to strategy and strategic behaviour than culture alone. Nonetheless, the dimensions of strategy cited below are expressed in behaviour by people and institutions that both have internalised strategic culture and in part construct, interpret, and amend that culture. In other words, the strategic cultural context for strategic behaviour includes the human strategic actors and their institutions which ‘make culture’ by interpreting what they discern. Arcane though it may sound, this discussion bears directly upon such matters as whether, why, and how, people, politics and would-be politics, fight.

Definitional clarity usually is useful, but one needs to remember that the price of clarity can be clear error. In calling this article ‘strategic culture as context,’ I accept, actually I even welcome, a key dualism in social-scientific definitions of context. To be specific, context can be considered as something ‘out there,’ typically in concentric circles, meaning ‘that which surrounds.’<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, or, methodologically perilously, as well, one can approach context as ‘that which weaves together’ (from

<sup>2</sup> Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> This discussion draws heavily upon the excellent analysis in Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), pp. 131–37.

the Latin, *contextere*: to weave together). In this discussion strategic culture can be conceived as a context out there that surrounds, and gives meaning to, strategic behaviour, as the total warp and woof of matters strategic that are thoroughly woven together, or as both.

### Ideas and behaviour

In the mid-1970s, a small number of strategic theorists came to believe that strategic ideas and some strategic behaviour were much more the products of educational processes of social construction than the professional literature on defence matters then recognised. Those scholars were much taken by Bernard Brodie's claim that 'good strategy presumes good anthropology and sociology. Some of the greatest military blunders of all time have resulted from juvenile evaluations in this department.'<sup>4</sup> This ranks among the wisest of observations in the entire history of strategic thought. The fact that Brodie rediscovered the obvious does not detract much from its luminosity.

It is probably accurate to say that the initial, if you will, first-generation, literature on the startlingly familiar yet strangely under-explored notion of strategic culture, was more workmanlike than truly scholarly.<sup>5</sup> That probability noted, still it seems that the study of strategic culture has advanced boldly into avoidable conceptual, methodological, and practical ambush. The most prominent and influential of the latest generation of theorists on strategic culture is Alastair Iain Johnston. Although almost any scholarly work on strategic culture is granted importance because of its rarity, Johnston's work is especially significant both because it has been legitimised by publication in prestigious outlets, and because it contains errors of a kind that, if allowed to pass unchallenged for much longer, are apt to send followers into an intellectual wasteland.

How should we think about strategic culture, and why does it matter? Strategy can have many dimensions,<sup>6</sup> of which one is the cultural. Culture or cultures comprises the persisting (though not eternal) socially transmitted ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits of mind, and preferred methods of operation that are more or less specific to a particular geographically based security community that has had a necessarily unique historical experience. A particular community may well contain more than one strategic culture, just as there tend to be military cultures associated with

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York, 1973), p. 332.

<sup>5</sup> Works from the first generation include: Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, R-2154-AF (Santa Monica, CA, Sept. 1977); Colin S. Gray, 'National Style in Strategy: The American Example,' *International Security*, 6 (1981), pp. 21-47; idem, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Lanham, MD, 1986); idem, *War, Peace and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (New York, 1990), esp. ch. 2; Carnes Lord, 'American Strategic Culture,' *Comparative Strategy*, 5 (1985), pp. 269-93; and Carl G. Jacobsen (ed.), *Strategic Power: USA/USSR* (New York, 1990), Pt. 1.

<sup>6</sup> I am pleased to acknowledge the inspiration provided by Michael Howard, 'The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy,' *Foreign Affairs*, 57 (1979), pp. 975-86. I have developed my thoughts on the dimensions of strategy in 'RMAs and the Dimensions of Strategy,' *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 17 (Autumn/Winter 1997-98), pp. 50-4.

particular missions or geographical environments.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, strategic culture(s) can change over time, as new experience is absorbed, coded, and culturally translated. Culture, however, changes slowly. Scholars who prefer to look only to recent history as the determining influence upon contemporary strategic culture, would be well advised to change concepts. If strategic culture is held to be significantly reshapeable on a year by year, or even on a decade by decade, basis, then culture probably is unduly dignified, even pretentious, a term to characterise the phenomena at issue.

The dimensions of strategy interpenetrate. Everything a security community does, if not a manifestation of strategic culture, is at least an example of behaviour effected by culturally shaped, or encultured,<sup>8</sup> people, organisations, procedures, and weapons. A critic would be correct in observing that if strategic culture is everywhere it is, in practicably researchable terms, nowhere. That critic, however, would have missed the point (that, for example, Germans are Germans and, it is postulated, have had certain strategic cultural tendencies). In their strategic behaviour, Germans cannot help but behave except under the constraints of Germanic strategic culture, even when they are unable to adhere strictly to the dominant ideas and preferences of their strategic culture. Hitler sought to draw strength in 1942–45 from the common German belief that theirs was the historic duty of protecting Europe from the barbarians to the East. This belief, or myth, had power over contemporary German imagination.

By far the most persuasively plausible definition of culture that I have uncovered is that offered by sociologist Raymond Williams. Williams claims that the definition of culture has three general categories: the ‘ideal,’ the ‘documentary,’ and the ‘social.’ Respectively, Williams’ categories include values pertaining to some ‘timeless order,’ “‘the artefacts” of intellectual and imaginative work in which human thought and experience are variously recorded,’ and finally he advises that culture ‘is a description of a particular way of life which finds expression in institutions and ordinary behaviour.’<sup>9</sup> In other words, culture is ideals, it is the evidence of ideas, and it is behaviour. Should doubts remain over the authority for my preferred usage, both the Oxford and Webster’s dictionaries define culture as embracing ideas *and* patterns of behaviour.

Essential to a properly holistic understanding of strategy, and especially to a grasp of the ways in which culture can manifest itself, is the proposition that strategy has several, or many, dimensions. These dimensions apply to, indeed play on, strategy in all periods. This conceptual structure effectively is unmoved even by radical changes

<sup>7</sup> Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore, 1989); Deborah D. Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, NJ, 1997). The review article by Theo Farrell, ‘Figuring Out Fighting Organizations: The New Organizational Analysis In Strategic Studies,’ *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19 (1996), pp. 122–356, is strongly recommended reading, as also is another review article by Farrell, ‘Culture and Military Power,’ *The Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 407–16.

<sup>8</sup> I apologise for the neologism of ‘encultured,’ but it would seem to be licensed at least implicitly by the long recognised words, accultured and acculturation. If one can be accultured, as the Oxford and Webster’s dictionaries allow, logically initially one must have been encultured. In order to transfer one’s culture, first one must have a culture to be transferred.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘The Analysis of Culture,’ in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead, UK, 1994), p. 56.

in the details relevant to each dimension (e.g., the ethical, or the technological, dimension will play distinctly in each strategic condition). The importance of this inclusive view of strategy and war is its insistence that strategy comprises all of the dimensions identified, and that there are practical limits to what excellence on just a few dimensions can achieve (e.g., better weapons, superior geographical position, and so forth), if one is massively disadvantaged even on just one or two of the dimensions (e.g., poor leadership, unpopularity of a conflict at home, which translates as a low score on the political command and social dimensions). I choose to group strategy's dimensions into three clusters. The first category, 'People and Politics,' comprises: people; society; culture; politics; and ethics. The second category, 'Preparation for War,' accommodates: economics and logistics; organisation (including defence, force, and more directly, war, planning); military preparation and administration (including recruitment, training, and many aspects of armament); information and intelligence; strategic theory and doctrine; and technology. The final category, 'War Proper,' groups: military operations; command (political and military); geography; friction (including chance and uncertainty); the adversary; and time.<sup>10</sup>

Anyone who seeks a falsifiable theory of strategic culture in the school of Johnston, commits the same error as a doctor who sees people as having entirely separable bodies and minds. In his writings about Chinese strategic culture, Iain Johnston's apparently methodologically progressive determination to consider culture distinctively from behaviour for the purpose of studying the influence of the former on the latter, transpires paradoxically to be a scholarly step or two backwards. There is an obvious sense in which positivistically he is seeking to explain how the cultural context (as 'that which surrounds') does, or does not, influence the realm of action. From the perspective of methodological rigour it is hard to fault him. The problem is that we cannot understand strategic behaviour by that method, be it ever so rigorous. Strategic culture is not only 'out there,' also it is within us; we, our institutions, and our behaviour, are the context.

Whatever the sins of omission and commission in the first generation of writings about strategic culture, those writings were plausible on the most important matters; moreover, even with hindsight and in the light of some fierce criticism, they still look plausible. What did those theorists attempt to say? On the basis of familiarity with strategic history, they hypothesised that different security communities and sub-communities (1) tend to exhibit in their strategic thought *and behaviour* patterns that could be collectively termed cultural, and that (2) strategic culture finds expression in distinctively patterned styles of strategic behaviour. When Johnston criticises my early work on strategic culture for being deterministic,<sup>11</sup> he misunderstands the nature of the subject in dispute. Johnston's real source of unhappiness with my writings on strategic culture lies in his dislike of my definition of the concept. I conflate strategic ideas and strategic behaviour, to the effect, according to Johnston, that my theory is tautological and therefore unfalsifiable.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The distinction that I draw between 'preparation for war' and 'war proper,' is, of course, borrowed from Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. and eds. (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 131.

<sup>11</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, p. 8; (see note 1 above).

<sup>12</sup> Johnston, 'Thinking about Strategic Culture,' pp. 36–9; *Cultural Realism*, pp. 7–10.

Johnston commits several errors. First, he requires ‘a notion of strategic culture that is falsifiable or at least distinguishable from nonstrategic-culture variables.’<sup>13</sup> Reasonable though that requirement should be, Johnston does not understand a point raised by anthropologist Leslie A. White: ‘Culture is not basically anything. Culture is a word-concept. It is man-made and may be used arbitrarily to designate anything, we may define the conception we please.’<sup>14</sup> Even scholars can forget that definitions are neither right nor wrong. Second, although definitions necessarily are arbitrary, a definition driven by the needs of theory building rather than by the character of the subject, is unusually likely to lead scholars astray.

There is something to be said for restricting the concept of culture to the realm of ideas, to the assumptions that lie behind strategic behaviour, but there is sense in Robert B. Bathurst’s words when he writes, to adapt, ‘[s]trategic culture, here, refers to those prominent patterns of . . . [strategic] behaviour which are indicative of social ways of seeing and responding to “reality”.’<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in an invented conversation, Clyde Kluckhohn and William H. Kelly’s ‘Second Anthropologist’ advises that ‘what the anthropologist does is to record the distinctive ways of behaving which he sees and those results of behavior which are also characteristic. These constitute the culture of the group.’<sup>16</sup> Finally, for a variant, anthropologist Marvin Harris informs us that ‘[c]ulture . . . refers to the learned repertory of thoughts and actions exhibited by the members of social groups – repertories transmissible independently of genetic heredity from one generation to the next.’<sup>17</sup>

The traffic between ideas and behaviour in strategic affairs is continuous, hence my preference for the idea that context is more about ‘that which weaves together,’ than it is about ‘that which surrounds.’ As the intellectual history of strategy, including its manifestation in national or sub-national strategic culture, bears the stamp of particular perceptions and interpretations of strategic history, so the domain of strategic behaviour is shaped by the strategic attitudes and ideas that we know as strategic culture. In the practical world of strategy, strategic ideas apply to strategic experience, while strategic experience constitutes ideas in action, albeit as modified by the constraints of imperfect practice.

Johnston’s approach flags some important concerns. For example, up to a point he is correct to signal the perils of determinism in sweeping claims for the explanatory value of the concept of strategic culture. Also, his work is useful in reminding us of the probable facts that a security community may have several strategic cultures, that culture evolves over time, and that strategic culture may comprise more a litany of canonical idealised beliefs than a set of attitudes, perspectives, and preferences that are operational as real guides to action. Furthermore, Johnston is partially correct when he alerts scholars to the difficulties posed by a concept of strategic culture that comprises so extensive a portfolio of ingredients, and is so influential upon behaviour, that it can explain nothing because it purports to explain everything.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, it would seem that Johnston read the score rather than listened to the

<sup>13</sup> Johnston, ‘Thinking about Strategic Culture,’ p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Leslie A. White, *The Concept of Cultural Systems: A Key to Understanding Tribes and Nations* (New York, 1975), p. 4, n.

<sup>15</sup> Robert B. Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror: On Creating an Enemy* (London, 1993), p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Clyde Kluckhohn and William H. Kelly, ‘The Concept of Culture,’ in Charles C. Hughes (ed.), *Custom-Made: Introductory Readings for Cultural Anthropology* (Chicago, 1976, 2nd edn.), p. 188.

<sup>17</sup> Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York, 1979), p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, pp. 12–13.

music. We first-generation scholars of strategic culture, albeit with exceptions, were not advancing a culturally distinctive theory of strategy, at least we did not think that we were. At times, some of us, myself included, may well have appeared both careless in our all too implicit causalities (connecting cultural preference and particular behaviour), and perilously tautological. It is useful to have those weaknesses signalled clearly, so that scholars speak more plainly. Although the written products of our speculation may have seemed somewhat deterministic, by and large all that we intended was to remind our readers and official clients that there was a notably Soviet-Russian dimension to the Cold-War foe; we were not competing with some 'black-boxed' superpower 'A' or 'B' that was beyond culture. Probably, we oversignalled the cultural argument, but that is not unusual when arguments are novel.

Johnston does not grasp the nature of strategic culture. He objects to a theory that is effectively untestable because its evidential domain is pervasive. The problem, though, does not lie so much in poor methodology and casual conceptualisation on the part of people like myself—though that charge may well have merit—but rather with Johnston's overly simple view of strategy. Although each dimension of strategy can be discussed in isolation, all dimensions function synergistically to constitute the strategy whole.

On balance, it may be desirable to fence-in the concept of strategic culture with reference to ideas, attitudes, traditions, and preferences for kinds of action, and to consider the actual behaviour of a strategic culture, or cultures, as the realm of 'style.'<sup>19</sup> It is important to understand that even when a particular security community is performing missions that are not long preferred, if not actually alien, it must behave in a culturally shaped manner. Germans cannot help but be Germans, whether they are waging war as they would prefer or as they must. Culture is behaviour, because those responsible for the behaviour necessarily are encultured as Germans, Britons, and so forth.<sup>20</sup>

One should resist the suggestion in some recent scholarship that somehow strategic culture, or cultures, can be sidelined and offset by other influences upon strategic choice.<sup>21</sup> The idea of strategic culture does not imply that there is a simple one-for-one relationship between culturally traceable preferences and actual operational choices.<sup>22</sup> The claim rather, is that culture shapes the process of strategy-making, and influences the execution of strategy, no matter how close actual choice may be to some abstract or idealised cultural preference. This simple, but crucial, point, can elude the intellectual grasp even of careful scholars. For example, in a recent major review of 'culturalist' theories of security, Michael Desch draws an invalid distinction between culturalist theories and realist theories of national security.<sup>23</sup> Desch does not seem to understand that 'realist' analysis and policy is

<sup>19</sup> Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style*, ch. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Dean Peabody, *National Characteristics* (Cambridge, UK, 1985); Edward L. Keenan, 'Muscovite Political Folkways,' *The Russian Review*, 45 (1986), pp. 115–81; and Emilio Willems, *A Way of Life and Death: Three Centuries of Prussian-German Militarism, An Anthropological Approach* (Nashville, TN, 1986), are all useful.

<sup>21</sup> This idea helps drive Johnston's methodology in *Cultural Realism*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Desch, 'Culture Clash,' has as its central theme comparison of the utility of culturalist and realist theories of international relations. To my mind, to draw a distinction between realism and culturalism is to miss the point that strategy and security always is 'done' by people and organisations who must function within the domain of cultural influences.

undertaken by particularly encultured people and organisations. Perhaps the point is too obvious to attract scholarly notice.

The unity of cultural influence and policy action denies the existence of the boundaries needed for the study of cause and effect. If there is cause in the effect, how can cause be assessed for its effect? Happily the problem lies with the question, not with the answer. Strategic culture and patterns of strategic behaviour, if one elects to separate them conceptually, are related integrally much as strategy, operations, and tactics are related. Just as all strategy has to be 'done' by operations which consist of tactical behaviour, so all strategic, operational, and tactical behaviour is 'done' by people and organisations that have been encultured supranationally, nationally, or sub-nationally. As the anthropologist Edward T. Hall has emphasised, culture, in this case strategic culture, provides context for events and ideas.<sup>24</sup> Some societies (e.g., Russian) are high-context, some are low-context: that is to say that some societies take a relatively complex and organic view of events, seeing sub-texts and sub-plots and subtle interconnections, while others (e.g., American) are prone to see simple oppositions (e.g., particular weapons are either stabilising or destabilising) and to approach each event on its isolated merits.<sup>25</sup> But, even a low-context strategic culture is still a strategic culture.

In practice, polities cannot afford to listen to much idle speculation of the scholarly kind suggested in Johnston's work. The policy interest in scholarship in strategic culture lies not so much in prediction of how culture 'out there' might influence behaviour, because behaviour can be triggered by many factors. Instead, the vital contextual question, that is cultural, is 'what does the observed behaviour mean?' It is more modest to seek to interpret than it is to predict, but strategic cultural scholarship is as likely to be useful in the former role as it will be unduly challenged in the latter.

Strategic culture matters deeply for modern strategy, because the culture of the strategic players, individuals and organisations influences strategic behaviour. One may not wish to endorse completely John Mueller's claim for the power of ideas when he asserts that 'the grand strategies of the major contestants [in the Cold War] and therefore the essential shape and history of that conflict were chiefly determined by differences in ideas and ideologies that emanate from domestic politics, not by structural differences in the distribution of capabilities at the international level.'<sup>26</sup> Mueller concludes his innovative essay with the bold claim that 'domestic changes that lead to changes in political ideas may be far more important influences on international behaviour than changes in the international distribution of military capabilities.'<sup>27</sup> For example, a radical change in Soviet ideology in the mid to late 1980s led to a no less radical change in Soviet foreign policy, even though the military capabilities of the United States registered no matching radical change in those years: in other words, that change in Soviet ideology was not coerced by the international correlation of forces.

<sup>24</sup> Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY, 1977), chs. 6–8.

<sup>25</sup> Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror*, ch.3; see note 15 above.

<sup>26</sup> John Mueller, 'The Impact of Ideas on Grand Strategy,' in Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein (eds.), *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

## Strategy is universal, but cultural

The nature and purpose of strategy is permanent and universal; it is also, in its particular historical form and content, inescapably cultural. Johnston laments that '[m]uch empirical work on strategic culture has also been hampered by a lack of methodological rigour.'<sup>28</sup> Alas, the concept of strategic culture, in common with the idea of paradox,<sup>29</sup> expresses an important pervasive, yet in detail typically elusive, truth about the nature and practice of strategy. It is in the nature of strategy to be subject to a paradoxical logic, just as it is in the nature of strategy to reflect the culture of its particular maker and executor. Strategic culture, like paradox in strategy, is a useful notion provided one does not ask too much of it.

In discussing Sun Tzu, historians Barry S. Strauss and Josiah Ober draw attention to his pithy advice on 'the issue of ideology, by which we mean the matrix of unexamined assumptions, opinions, and prejudices that every human being brings to the decision-making process.'<sup>30</sup> The authors note that 'Sun Tzu reminds us that sense [as in commonsense] is usually idiosyncratic and seldom crosses cultural lines.' It is powerfully plausible to postulate that people and the institutions through which they function are educated by their distinctive contexts to bear more or less particular cultural preconceptions. Just as friction in war cannot be eliminated by technological advance, in part because people must employ the new machines,<sup>31</sup> so 'people, being of the human condition . . . are necessarily enmeshed in a network of preconceptions.'<sup>32</sup> Why should this be so? In her brilliant pioneering study, *Politics and Culture in International History*, Adda B. Bozeman advises 'that each society is moved by the circumstances of its existence to develop its own approach to foreign relations. This means that diplomacy, as for that matter every other social institution, is bound to incorporate the traditions and values peculiar to the civilization in which it is practiced.'<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Bathurst argues that people cope with incoming data in files that organise their understanding of the world. Moreover, in Bathurst's words,

[c]ultures teach us to see according to the labels on the files. . . . [I]t follows that a nation's wars are congruent with that nation's political and social structures. The way it chooses, defines and perceives its enemies, estimates their intentions and plans to counter them necessarily comes from its unique expression, arising out of its systems and organisations.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Johnston, 'Thinking about Strategic Culture,' p. 63. He is no less severe in 'Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China,' pp. 221–22. Interestingly enough, while Desch (in 'Culture Clash,' p. 170) judges the Cold War wave of theory 'largely discredited,' that 'wave of cultural theorizing had the virtue of making clear empirical predictions that made it possible to test its theories against both real-world evidence and alternative theories,' (p. 158). Johnston, by contrast, finds us Cold War theorists guilty of purveying untestable theories.

<sup>29</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Barry S. Strauss and Josiah Ober, *The Anatomy of Error: Ancient Military Disasters and Their Lessons for Modern Strategists* (New York, 1990), pp. 6–7.

<sup>31</sup> Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, McNair Paper 52 (Washington, DC, October 1996), esp. ch. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror*, p. 121.

<sup>33</sup> Adda B. Bozeman, *Politics and Culture in International History* (Princeton, NJ, 1960), p. 324. This book is the genuine article as an under-recognised classic.

<sup>34</sup> Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror*, p. 125.

Bozeman and Bathurst are persuasive to the point where one wonders how they could possibly be wrong. To be German, American, Russian, at a particular time is to be 'encultured' in particular ways. Those ways will vary modestly among, say, Germans at different times in German history, and there may be noteworthy distinctions among Germans even in the same period. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to postulate the presence of some important cultural features among people who share a common heritage, particularly if they are of a similar age. At least until the mid 1940s, Germans believed that they were the Eastern bulwark of European civilisation. Until perhaps 1968, Americans had great difficulty even conceiving of their country losing a war. In the winter of 1942–3, the Soviet defenders of Stalingrad believed that History was with them, both 'scientifically'—compliments of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin—and essentially morally because they represented Mother Russia. The alternative to the argument just advanced is close to absurd. How can there be a Strategic Person 'beyond culture'? A noteworthy strain in American defence analysis during the Cold War expressed transcultural confidence that it had unlocked the universal mysteries of, for example, strategic stability in the nuclear age. Needless to add, such arrogant positivism was itself profoundly cultural.<sup>35</sup>

In an effort to criticise theorists of the first generation on strategic culture, Johnston stumbles over reality, though without quite realising what he has uncovered. In his words:

To date, many of those who have explicitly used the term strategic culture have tended to define it in ways that make it unfalsifiable and untestable. Especially egregious in this regard is what could be called the first (and most influential) generation of studies in strategic culture. Definitionally, this literature subsumed both thought and action within the concept of strategic culture, leaving the mechanically deterministic implication that strategic thought led consistently to one type of behaviour. The literature also tended to include everything from technology to geography to ideology to past patterns of behaviour in an amorphous concept of strategic culture, even though those variables could stand as separate, even conflicting explanations for strategic choice. This left little conceptual space for non-strategic culture explanations of behaviour.<sup>36</sup>

I believe that Johnston is wrong, but he is wrong for the right reasons. The point is that strategic culture does indeed emerge from the kind of mixed stew of ingredients that Johnston finds, and finds so methodologically frustrating, in the early literature on the subject. To adapt Dennis Kavanagh's definition of political culture, 'we may regard the strategic culture [political culture, in original] as a shorthand expression to denote the emotional and attitudinal environment within which the defence community [political system, in original] operates.'<sup>37</sup> Ideas about war and strategy are influenced by physical and political geography—some strategic cultures plainly have, for example, a maritime or a continentalist tilt—by political or religious ideology, and by familiarity with, and preference for, particular military technologies. Strategic culture is the world of mind, feeling, and *habitus in behaviour*. Johnston is systemically wrong in two respects in conceiving of culture as clearly

<sup>35</sup> Colin S. Gray, 'Strategy in the Nuclear Age: The United States, 1945–1991,' in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (eds.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge, UK, 1994), pp. 589–98. Bruno Colson, *La culture stratégique Américaine: L'influence de Jomini* (Paris, 1993), is not without merit.

<sup>36</sup> Johnston, 'Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China,' pp. 221–2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>37</sup> Dennis Kavanagh, *Political Culture* (London, 1972), p. 10.

distinctive among 'conflicting explanations for strategic choice.' He errs in failing to recognise a cultural dimension to all that human beings think and feel about war and strategy. Culture is the context that 'surrounds' and the context that 'weaves together.' Johnston fails to spot the absurdity of the opposition that he postulates when he complains that there is little conceptual space remaining for explanations of behaviour beyond strategic culture. Let us state the methodologically appalling truth that there can be no such conceptual space, because all strategic behaviour is effected by human beings who cannot help but be cultural agents.

Occasionally, an overwhelmingly maritime strategic culture, like the British in World War I, is obliged to play an uncharacteristically major continental military role. However, the fact of the huge British continental commitment of 1914–18 did not alter the dominant British strategic culture, notwithstanding the infantry experience of a whole generation of Britons. Indeed, exaggerated claims for a traditional British maritime orientation in strategy were pressed in the 1920s and 1930s in ways that overstated the culturally strategically extraordinary character of the size and responsibility of the BEF of 1916–18.<sup>38</sup> Strategic culture explains why the continental role was, certainly psychologically was, so different for Britain, as contrasted with some other great powers, it does not explain why Britain chose to wage war as a continental power in those years. In other words, strategic culture provides context, even where the final choice is all but counter-cultural.

For another example, although the United States has joined and, in one case, even led, three coalitions in the twentieth century, and notwithstanding the fact that the third of those coalition commitments is now nearly of fifty years' duration (i.e. NATO), isolationism, certainly unilateralism, remains a potent icon and impulse for policy in the United States.<sup>39</sup> There is a decidedly hollow ring to Richard Holbrooke's bold claim that 'the United States has become a European power in a sense that goes beyond traditional assertions of America's "commitment" to Europe.'<sup>40</sup> Even when security communities function strategically in ways flatly contrary to a dominant tradition—Britain in 1916–18, or America's repeated involvement in entangling alliances—those actions do not produce a seismic shift in strategic culture. Furthermore, when a preponderantly maritime culture commits to continental warfare on the largest of scales, or when an isolationist culture becomes a partner in coalition-style strategic ventures, the stamp of those basic moulds will be seen in the ways behaviour is adapted to the practical needs of the uncharacteristic roles. For example, Hew Strachan has shown how resistant to revolutionary change was the traditional 'British way of war,' even under the greatest of pressures of continental military crisis in the First World War.<sup>41</sup>

Cultural preconceptions are inescapable, but they are not of some malign necessity pathological. To be encultured as a German or American may be unavoidable,

<sup>38</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare* (London, 1932), ch. 1. Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London, 1972); Hew Strachan, 'The British Way in Warfare Revisited,' *The Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), pp. 447–61; and idem, 'The British Way in Warfare,' in David Chandler (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army* (Oxford, UK, 1994), pp. 417–34, visit the relevant issues.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., 'Back to the Womb? Isolationism's Renewed Threat,' *Foreign Affairs*, 74 (1995), pp. 2–8.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Holbrooke, 'America, a European Power,' *Foreign Affairs*, 74 (1995), p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> Hew Strachan, 'The Battle of the Somme and British Strategy,' *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 21 (March 1998), pp. 79–95.

but there is nothing about being a German or American that requires one to fail to recognise the cultural distinctiveness of others. I may be British and American, but I do not have to believe that all the world thinks and feels as do Britons and Americans. Cultural reductionism, even stereotyping, and their polar opposite, ethnocentrism, are to a degree unavoidable.<sup>42</sup> In strategy we have to deal with human beings—Germans, Chinese, and so forth—collectively, and we can only interpret incoming information with reference to what we know in our culture of their culture (which is an unavoidable brand of ethnocentrism). Nonetheless, while recognising ethnocentrism as a cardinal sin against the gods of sound strategy, some cultural reductionism and stereotyping is inescapable and can even yield judgements of tolerable accuracy.

The term cultural preconception has pejorative connotations that can mislead the unwary. Whereas many American soldiers entered World War II with scant respect for a German army which their preconceptions told them was bound to be rigidly teutonic in action, British soldiers—trained by experience in 1914–18 and 1940–1—were apt to hold the accurate preconception that the German army was formidable in its tactical flexibility.<sup>43</sup> The British were correct, as Americans learnt in Tunisia, Italy, and later in France. For another example, during the Napoleonic wars British admirals and generals typically held strategic cultural preconceptions about their French foe at sea and on land that were good enough to provide an accurate overall frame of reference within which campaigns and battle plans could be prepared with reasonable confidence. When Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson planned the apparently reckless ploy of attacking the Franco-Spanish line of battle in three, then two, columns off Cape Trafalgar in October 1805, he rested his plan upon preconceptions about the enemy that expressed the wisdom of great experience. Nelson knew his enemy.<sup>44</sup>

Even if one elects to restrict the concept of strategic culture to the mind and the emotions, and to treat strategic behaviour as activity that can flow from several motives or influences, including the cultural, whence can strategic cultural notions emerge? Strategic culture may be regarded as the zone of ideas, but ideas about strategic matters have to derive from intellectual and emotional interaction with experience, widely understood and however gathered and processed. Since there may be contending orientations and schools of strategic thought, strategic culture or cultures, appears existentially as those working ‘assumptions underlying everyday life’<sup>45</sup> that provide ‘the emotional and attitudinal environment.’ The policymaker, the military professional, and the concerned citizen, cannot approach contemporary challenges in a strategic cultural void. Human beings are encultured as people who live in communities, and because, alas, those communities are communities for security, humans have no choice other than to undergo a process of strategic enculturation.

<sup>42</sup> Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London, 1979), is essential.

<sup>43</sup> David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (London, 1983); Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, CT, 1982); Michael D. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944–1945* (Lawrence, KS, 1994).

<sup>44</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (London, 1899, 2nd edn.), chs. 22–3; Julian S. Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (London, 1910).

<sup>45</sup> Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, UK, 1994, rev. edn.), p. xxii.

## Culture is as culture does: explaining and understanding strategic culture in modern strategy

It may appear paradoxical to some readers that an article drafted to explore the salience of specific local contexts for the making and execution of strategy is so abstract. But, in the absence of a scholarly consensus about the meaning and functioning of strategic culture, detailed historical case studies can illustrate nothing much beyond the conceptual apparatus preferred by the theorists in question. Because strategic culture, no less than culture itself, is a contested concept, no amount of rigorous empirical historical enquiry will liberate scholars from the perils of arguable definitions. Nonetheless, there is a useful way to understand the nature and behavioural implications of strategic culture.

Because of its nature and content, strategy attracts ‘interested’ scholarship. In the same way that a British scholar, even though he should be culturally self-aware, cannot help but be British, so theorists and other commentators of every political affiliation can hardly help but be interested in the strategic choices that must affect the public, and their personal, security. Even if a scholar’s preponderant interest lies in the value of a book for his professional résumé as the agent of his personal advancement, choice of strategic topic, and the character of argument developed, is likely to express some more or less overt commitment to the value of national or international security. Scholars, scarcely less than politicians and generals, cannot be de-cultured, as opposed to accultured, or somehow rendered indifferent to the practical consequences of strategic debate. Strategic theory should be honest, but it can hardly be disinterested. Even when the strategic theorist seeks evidence and inspiration from temporally far distant contexts, the essential unity of all strategic experience guarantees the feasibility of a current policy agenda. Two modern historians of antiquity address directly the issue of an enduring historical unity to strategic matters.

Can modern policymakers really derive lessons from ancient warfare? . . . [T]he advent of modern technology has in no way lessened the strategist’s need to adapt his military plan to social and political realities. The second half of the twentieth century has seen a series of startling defeats handed to great powers by warriors whose strategic insight made up for their inferior weapons. Algeria, Vietnam, and Afghanistan are cases in point. Evidently, technology has not replaced strategy as the determining factor in military strategy. *We believe it is precisely the technologically low level of ancient warfare that makes it so valuable an object of modern study.*<sup>46</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with Strauss and Ober – plainly something provided adequate compensation for inferior weapons in Algeria, Vietnam, and Afghanistan<sup>47</sup> – their approach, though obviously self serving to ancient historians arguing for the contemporary utility of their historical expertise, is instructive. In *Anatomy of Error*, Strauss and Ober affirm the universality of strategy in time and place, the value of a policy agenda as a focus and guide for scholarship, and the salience of strategic history, even temporally far distant strategic history, for general strategic enlightenment today.

<sup>46</sup> Strauss and Ober, *Anatomy of Error*, pp. 9–10. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> A forthcoming book addresses the pertinent issues superbly: A. J. Bacevich and Brian Sullivan (eds.), *The Limits of Technology in Modern War*.

It can be difficult to talk about the ubiquity and importance of strategic culture, without appearing reductively to claim that strategic culture is the golden key to strategic understanding. For reasons explored here already, strategic culture is not, and cannot be, such a golden key: strategic culture offers context, not reliable causality. A dominant culture need not be associated with a particular national group, some cultural pluralism is possible, even likely. Strategic cultures change over time, albeit probably slowly (otherwise the phenomenon would not merit description as cultural), and strategic choices occasionally are made that contradict the dominant culture.<sup>48</sup>

Six general points serve to help advance understanding of the nature and working of strategic culture.

*(1) Strategic behaviour cannot be beyond culture*

Strategic behaviour can be eccentric from some viewpoints, incompetent, unsuccessful, even contrary to cultural norms, but it cannot be a-cultural, beyond culture. A de-cultured person, organisation, or security community, would have to be deprogrammed even of the process of learning about, and from, his or its own past. The proposition of extra-culturality is ridiculous. It is not at all ridiculous to postulate a person, organisation, or security community which treats a strategic issue in isolation from any context but its apparent own, though even in the case of such extreme pragmatism—which is perhaps a distinctive culture—the actor would need to know enough beyond the issue to recognise a strategic matter for what it is. To claim, for example, that the United States is a pragmatic problem-solving culture, although it affirms the existence of a socially programmed broad approach to challenges, does not imply that all American players in the process of strategy-making must agree on the details of the solutions preferred. Overall, culture is context. In the absence of such context events must lack meaning.

*(2) Adversity cannot cancel culture*

Strategically encultured Americans, or Russians, do not cease to be so encultured just because they are obliged to function strategically under conditions of severe constraint. Plainly, the grimmer the national circumstance, the less the scope for exercising strategic cultural preferences. Nonetheless, even when the enemy has the initiative, one does not cease to be socially strategically programmed. The USSR was ideologically hollow at the core, with the quaint pseudoscience of Marxism-Leninism contrasting ever more starkly with the unmistakable absurdities of Soviet life. That USSR, however, was in notable part the product of the distinctive beliefs and rhythm of Russian culture. Central authority in Russia has collapsed precipitately three times in this century (1905, 1917, 1991). In adversity or in triumph, Russians have to be Russians. Even when Russians behave in an arena unpreferred

<sup>48</sup> Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style*, p. 35.

by their strategic culture, for example at sea, they are apt to behave in ways, and for purposes, that are culturally characteristic.<sup>49</sup> In the 1980s, US maritime strategists, unsurprisingly, sought to find and comprehend a Soviet maritime strategy that matched or sought to offset US maritime strategy, much as US theorist-practitioners of arms control sought in vain to find a matching Soviet concept of strategic stability. In neither instance did the dominant school among Americans appreciate suitably that Russian strategic culture, with ideas and in behaviour, organised its strategic world differently. As land animals, Russians conceived maritime operations very much as adjuncts to continental enterprises.

This is not to succumb to the relativist trap of what has been called ‘ethnic-chic,’ with particular reference to an alleged sinological fallacy.<sup>50</sup> Chinese, or Germans, do not necessarily respond to strategic stimuli in some noticeably, let alone eccentrically, Chinese or German ways. But Chinese and Germans are socially educated distinctively in their strategic assumptions and, even when they are obliged to act responsively under duress, are likely to assess distinctively their options and the consequences of exercising each of them. The greater the pressure upon an individual or organisation to act, and the more hastily the decision is taken, the greater is the likelihood of behaviour manifesting what Bathurst usefully calls ‘cultural instinct.’<sup>51</sup> When there is little time to explore the details of the pressing case, the strategist then is obliged to go with what he knows already and to act according to what he judges, and feels, to be correct: ‘Culture Rules.’

### (3) *Strategic culture is a guide to action*

Strategic culture has to be a guide to strategic action, whether or not the kind of action that culture prefers is practicable. Moreover, unlike strategic theory, which, as Clausewitz argues, ‘need not be a sort of *manual* for action’ that would ‘accompany [the future commander] to the battlefield,’<sup>52</sup> strategic culture is on the battlefield inalienably because it pervades the combatants and their military organisations. Soldiers carry their culture with them into battle. It may well be the case that one can locate, as did Johnston with Ming dynasty China, a polity that has two or more cultures, at least one of which is more a set of ideal standards than a practical manual for behaviour.<sup>53</sup> However, strategic culture, or cultures, has to be a guide to action as well as comprising, existentially, descriptive reality, notwithstanding the frequent fact that an adverse strategic necessity can subvert or utterly overthrow its influence. The prescriptive character of strategic culture flows inexorably from the nature of strategy. If strategy is about what works in the world to bridge the

<sup>49</sup> Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror*.

<sup>50</sup> Gerald Segal, ‘Strategy and “Ethnic Chic”,’ *International Affairs*, 60 (1983–4), pp. 15–30. Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (London, 1996, 2nd edn.), p. 3. For the opinion that there are contrasting broadly Western and Eastern, or Oriental, strategic cultures, see Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (London, 1989), and John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror*, pp. 25–6.

<sup>52</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 141. Emphasis in original.

<sup>53</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*.

potential chasm between political ends and military agents, it has to follow that strategic culture is at least contingently prescriptive.

*(4) Strategic culture expresses comparative advantage*

For a particular security community the same blend of comparative advantages (e.g., easy access to the open sea) and disadvantages (e.g., absence of 'natural' frontiers on land) that yields a dominant strategic culture, also yields a distinction between the kind of strategic activities that that community will tend to perform either well or poorly. This is not to deny the possibility of strategic cultural pluralism, or the (generally slow) evolution of culture under the press of new experience. 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.<sup>54</sup> If technology and technique, which is to say tactical prowess, were all that there were to the effectiveness of special operations forces, then the US Army's Delta Force, Green Berets, and Rangers, and the US Navy's SEALs, would be as good as anyone's special forces. The problem for US special forces is that the US armed forces as a whole are not friendly to less than wholly regular troops, and that US organisations for strategy-making and execution are not receptive to the strategic and operational promise in special operations.<sup>55</sup> The leading difficulty lies with military cultures and strategic culture. Times appear to be changing in the United States in favour of special operations' capabilities, but cultural resistance to allowing special warriors to wage war in their own kind of way remains powerful.<sup>56</sup>

When dominant security communities are obliged either by adverse circumstances or by eccentric policy and strategy-making to behave in culturally radically atypical ways, success will be unlikely. A security community is unlikely to perform well at unfamiliar tasks; for example the Germans and the Russians in surface naval warfare. After all, the strategic cultures that focus upon land warfare are the cultures pressed by long and painful experience to devote far more resources to continental than to maritime affairs. Also, there are physical reasons why particular communities have evolved their individual dominant strategic cultures. Both Russia and Germany have had strategically chronic problems securing access to the open sea.<sup>57</sup>

A security community can behave in ways massively contrary to the strategic preferences implied by its dominant strategic culture; Britain and the United States did exactly this, respectively in World War I and in Vietnam. Even though the Great War was won, general public and much military expert opinion in the inter-war years came to believe that never again should Britain wage mass continental warfare, a form of conflict popularly deemed to be lethally unBritish.<sup>58</sup> In Vietnam, the US

<sup>54</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, CT, 1996), Pt. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Gray, *Modern Strategy*, ch. 12.

<sup>56</sup> See Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding US Special Operations Forces* (Washington, DC, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> Wolfgang Wegener, *The Naval Strategy of the World War*, trans. Holger H. Herwig (Annapolis, MD, 1989), is a powerful German statement of the importance of geography to naval power.

<sup>58</sup> Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the World Wars* (Oxford, UK, 1980).

armed forces waged the American way of war in accordance with a dominant American strategic culture that favoured mechanised combat of all kinds, but they waged a form of war that probably could not succeed.<sup>59</sup> The American offence against its dominant culture, therefore, lay not in the chosen acts of military commission *per se*, but rather in their strategically inappropriate application. To resort to Clausewitz, because the United States could not settle upon a plausible military objective to fit a sound and stable political objective,<sup>60</sup> strategy failed. ‘Engagements’ could not advance ‘the object of the war.’ American politicians and American soldiers were punished by American society because they waged an American-preferred way of war in a context where that way of war could not deliver victory, in a cause deemed by many people to be un-American. It is common for strategic failure to be punished politically, at home as well as abroad. When that failure is delivered by armed forces directed to conduct forms of war that offend dominant cultural preferences, however, the domestic political backlash is apt to be severe and protracted.

(5) *Strategic culture can be dysfunctional*

Strategic cultures can contain strongly dysfunctional elements. It is possible for scholars to be so fearful of the accusation of ethnocentrism that they embrace a cultural relativism that blinds them to evidence of functionally irrational (as contrasted with unreasonable) ideas and behaviour. Societies are apt to run high risks of strategic failure when it appears that the broad precepts of a dominant strategic culture knowingly have been flouted. Security communities, however, can have such notably dysfunctional elements in their strategic cultures that, even when politics act congruently with their culture, they are likely to fail badly. In my early writings on strategic culture I believed that strategic culture evolved as an expression of generally successful adaptation to challenge. In other words, the dominant strategic culture of Germany should comprise ideas, attitudes, and habits, that worked well for Germans. That logic seemed compelling because, given the long time frame implied by the quality or dimension deemed cultural, it ought to be the case that maladaptive strategic cultures would vanish in more or less bloody a fashion.

On further reflection, the issue of the dysfunctional element in strategic culture appears more complex. To identify the characteristics of, say, a dominant Russian strategic culture, is not necessarily to identify a culture that maximises the prospects

<sup>59</sup> Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA, 1982); Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD, 1986); Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge, 1996); H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York, 1997); Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965–1972* (Westport, CT, 1997); and Jeffrey Record, ‘Vietnam in Retrospect: Could We Have Won?’ *Parameters*, 26 (1996–7), pp. 51–65. US defeat in Vietnam appears to have been so overdetermined that some powerful arguments suggesting, and evidence for, US success in Vietnam has yet to receive a decent hearing. A forthcoming PhD thesis by Dale Walton, a student at the Centre for Security Studies, University of Hull, will be a step in the right direction of more balanced scholarship.

<sup>60</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 579.

for Russian strategic success. It is probably more accurate to claim that Russian strategic culture has contributed massively to the three wholesale Russian/Soviet collapses of the twentieth century, and might have yielded an utterly irretrievable collapse in 1941–2. It is possible to argue that Russia's historical survival, notwithstanding periodic catastrophic or near catastrophic shocks, demonstrates that its dominant strategic culture has been good enough to meet the traffic of historical challenges. But also, one could argue that the constituents of Russia have been sufficiently robust as to be able to survive the behavioural consequences of a somewhat self-destructive culture.

The qualities functional and dysfunctional, like concepts of offensive and defensive or stabilising and destabilising, can have no meaning out of specific historical context. The machine-mindedness that is so prominent in the dominant American 'way of war' is inherently neither functional nor dysfunctional. When it inclines Americans to seek what amounts to a technological, rather than a political, peace, and when it is permitted to dictate tactics regardless of the political context, then on balance it is dysfunctional. Having said that, however, prudent and innovative exploitation of the technological dimension to strategy and war can be a vital asset. At the very least it is important for a security community to avoid being caught on the wrong end of a true technical deficiency, because then one is obliged to find operational, tactical, human, or other compensation on a heroic scale. For example, if enemy tanks are immune to our anti-tank artillery, and if friendly airpower cannot provide reliable protection, then we leave our infantry to their courage, skill, and terrifyingly personally deliverable devices, when confronted by hostile armour.

Strategic cultures obviously pass at least minimal tests of consistency with community survival. Strategic culture, the assumptions that underlie, but do not dictate, strategic behaviour, has to make sense to its human agents and client organisations. It is tempting to argue that security communities acquire and have their histories shaped by strategic and military cultures that obviously have worked for them. The proof is existential, if perilously circular. The community endures over decades, even centuries, so, self-evidently, the dominant strategic culture has to have been of net positive functional value – in the past, at least. After all, strategic culture in part is a celebration of community beliefs about historical strategic experience, and no community knowingly is going to enshrine advice for failure. Even when communities celebrate their apparent failures, those failures are apt to be tactical (e.g., the Alamo), at most operational (e.g., Dunkirk, Stalingrad), and are rendered into heroic fable for purpose of public inspiration. Strategic attitudes and beliefs can be simultaneously functional and dysfunctional (e.g., Nazi Germany's racial doctrine), and objectively dysfunctional and irrational, yet culturally inescapable in the short term (e.g., extreme Russian centralisation of political and military authority).

*(6) Strategic cultures can be variously categorised*

The study of modern strategy has yet to yield careful classification of strategic cultural orientations. Some recent theoretical writing on strategic culture is unhelpful in probing the subject. Instead of focusing on the question of whether ideas and behaviour are separable, with only the former being the zone of (strategic)

culture, the beliefs and behaviour of the human and organisational agents of culture(s) can best be understood with respect to seven non-exclusive categories of strategic cultural discrimination.

- Nationality (the security community as a whole). Distinctive historical experience encultures peoples more or less differently. Information is received and coded culturally, and strategic choices are made and exercised by people and organisations equipped with dominant national (or sub-national) strategic cultural lenses – bearing in mind that those national cultural lenses have been ground by historically distinctive experience.
- Geography. The physical characteristics of each distinctive geographical environment, notwithstanding technological change, yield noticeably distinctive strategic cultural attitudes and beliefs. In the insightful words of J. C. Wylie:

[T]he connotation of the word ‘strategy’ is not the same to the soldier as to the sailor or airman. The reason for this is elusive but very real. It has to do with the environment in which the conception is set. Where the sailor or airman think in terms of an entire world, the soldier at work thinks in terms of theaters, in terms of campaigns, or in terms of battles. And the three concepts are not too markedly different from each other. This state of mind in which the soldier derives his conception of the strategic scene is brought about primarily by the matter of geography.<sup>61</sup>

- Weapons and functions. In addition to being, for example, an American sailor, a person may be a naval aviator, submariner, or intelligence specialist, each of which professional orientation yields what can fairly be called a cultural influence all its own. Special operations forces provide distinctive functions which often should work synergistically with and be complementary to, the entire ‘joint’ effort of military power. Nonetheless, there is an unconventional mind-set for the special warrior that has a cultural quality.<sup>62</sup>
- Simplicity-complexity. Following the suggestion of anthropologist Edward T. Hall, and political scientist and naval intelligence professional Robert B. Bathurst, one can broadly categorise strategic cultures with reference to their attitude to simplicity and complexity of context. One can classify monochronic, one-thing-at-a-time cultures, and polychronic everything-is-interconnected cultures. Bathurst argues persuasively that the United States adheres to the former tendency, while Russia/the USSR is an exemplar of the latter.<sup>63</sup> Rephrased, some strategic cultures favour holistic analysis, others are wont to be more Cartesian, dissecting strategic problems for discrete, sequential treatment. There is an empirical difficulty with this candidate discriminator in that most of the strategic-cultural speculation that is sensitive to this test of complexity has focused on American and Soviet/Russian phenomena. We need case studies of other cultures.
- Generation. Individuals and age cohorts of individuals are apt to have their strategic worldview shaped by particular historical experience. In addition to being, say, an American sailor who is a career submariner inclined to monochronic decisionmaking, a person also will have his strategic culture influenced

<sup>61</sup> J. C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*, John B. Hattendorf, ed. (Annapolis, MD, 1989), p. 42.

<sup>62</sup> Gray, *Explorations In Strategy*, p. 156.

<sup>63</sup> Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror*, ch. 3; Hall, *Beyond Culture*, ch. 6–8.

by strategic education at the hand of the events that touched his life and imagination with special impact. Such events can be truly personal, or they can be historical context (in the sense, for example, that all contemporary Americans shared a virtual, if not actual, presence at the Berlin and Cuban crises of the early 1960s). Different generations, or age cohorts, will have their attitudes shaped by some different strategic-historical cultural influences. When looking back from today to World War II, for instance, it is easy to forget that the policymakers and leading military commanders of the 1939–41 period were nearly all survivors of the Great War of 1914–18, and that they had learnt about modern war from that experience. All people have some strategic cultural equivalent(s) to the example just given, even if it is not as traumatic. This is not to say that matters of age cohort overwhelm or negate strategic culture. It is to say, however, that a dominant strategic culture will be reintegrated by each generation in the light of its own distinctive experience. Culture evolves.

- **Grand strategy.** For reasons that warrant classification as cultural, strategic cultures and sub-cultures can be categorised according to grand strategic preference. A pattern of reliance upon one or several of the range of instruments of grand strategy (overt military power, diplomacy, espionage and covert action, positive and negative economic sanctions, and so forth), is apt to characterise particular strategic cultures. In practice it is not usually a question of a polity neatly picking the winner from among its array of instruments; rather is it a matter of selecting the appropriately weighted mixture of grand strategic instruments. Particular national level strategic cultures can be approximately categorised according to their pattern of preference when choosing among instruments.

### **All Dimensions of Strategy are Cultural**

The distinctive experience of particular security communities finds social expression in more or less distinctive patterns of enduring assumptions about strategic matters, and those patterns warrant description as cultural. Strategically encultured people will behave in ways influenced by their cultural pattern of assumptions. Strategic culture need not dictate a particular course of action, indeed domestic and external constraints frequently will prohibit such behaviour. But the effects of strategic culture will be more or less strongly stamped upon strategic behaviour of all kinds. Maritime Britain functioned as a major continental power from 1916 until 1918, but that brief continental performance did not cancel or deny the contrary character of Britain's dominant strategic culture. Actions taken apparently out of strategic cultural character are apt to confirm the rule rather than to change it.

Rarely can conceptual and empirical problems have posed such synergistic difficulties as with strategic culture. If culture is everywhere, then, inescapably, culture is nowhere. Plainly, cultural enquiry in the field of strategic studies is in urgent need of a few working rules. Above all else, strategic culture should be approached as the context that can provide understanding of what behaviour means. Unfortunately, however, to repeat, context means both 'that which surrounds' and that which 'weaves together.' It is as certain as anything can be in the social sciences, that Iain

Johnston is wrong when he tries to separate ideas from behaviour. Culture is as culture does: we are culture, we are part of our context. However, recent scholarship certainly is correct when it points to the real or apparent confusion of cause and effect of culture and policy, and when it complains about tautologies between cultural influences and culture in behaviour. Particularly strategically encultured polities will not be allowed by objective or subjective circumstance always to indulge their culturally preferred policy choices.

The scholastically effective solution to these dilemmas simply is to command that strategic culture is the realm of ideas and attitudes, which leaves the zone of strategic behaviour amenable to assay for strategic-cultural influence. Aside from the minor fact that this methodologically convenient distinction contradicts common linguistic usage, not to mention the best of anthropological theory, it offends against the evidence of experience. Nonetheless, readers are recommended not to pick either this author's, or Johnston's, approach to strategic culture, but rather to move on to a creative accommodation of the two, if that is possible.