

# What is the context? A reply to the Gray-Johnston debate on strategic culture

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Colin S. Gray, 'Strategic Culture as Context; the First Generation of Theory Strikes Back', *Review of International Studies*, 25:1 (January 1999).

Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Strategic Cultures Revisited: Reply to Colin Gray', *Review of International Studies*, 25:3 (July 1999).

Can cultural analysis tell us anything significant about strategic outcomes? This question has provided the focus for strategic culture research since it was first introduced as a concept by Jack Snyder in 1977.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 25 years on, we appear no closer to establishing a consensus on what strategic culture is and what it can tell us. In terms of theory and methodology, the concept of strategic culture remains under-explored. As Colin Gray notes, 'any scholarly work on strategic culture is granted importance because of its rarity'.<sup>2</sup> Hence the recent debate in *RIS* between Gray and Alastair Iain Johnston should be seen as significant.

In *Strategic Culture as Context* Gray reaffirms his earlier conceptualisation of strategic culture in response to Johnston's criticism of 'first generation' strategic cultural research.<sup>3</sup> Gray invokes a contextual strategic culture framework, thereby directly challenging Johnston's methodological assumption that cultural variables can be separated from non-cultural variables. This premise initially appears convincing. However, as Gray's analysis develops it appears that there may be some problems with his usage of 'culture as context' which require further investigation. In particular confusion arises from his discussion of independent material variables, which I would argue is inconsistent with his contextual interpretive framework. Nevertheless I will defend Gray's pursuit of strategic culture as context whilst advocating the use of a more consistent constitutive framework.

Johnston's reply to Gray provides some valuable insights into these issues, but according to his own ambitious positivist agenda, which in itself might be seen as

<sup>1</sup> Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Rand R-2154-AF, Santa Monica, CA, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Gray, 'Strategic Culture as Context', p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

problematic. Whilst Johnston's work must be recognised for providing the stimulus for much of the current research into strategic culture (including my own), I will also draw attention to some seemingly intractable problems associated with his approach.<sup>4</sup>

### **'Context all the way down?'**

First generation research into strategic culture emerged during the late 1970s from a realisation that the Soviet Union appeared to approach nuclear strategy according to a distinctive strategic cultural style that differed from that of the United States. Previously, Western strategic theory had been driven by the technological dictates of the nuclear revolution and rational actor models, which gave little (if any) credence to the idea of 'national styles in strategy'.<sup>5</sup> First-generation theorists sought to expose the dangers of thinking in this manner, urging a greater acceptance of the importance of cultural and strategic relativism. Whereas previously culture had been viewed as a residual or secondary explanation for strategic behaviour, first generation research sought to include it as primary explanation for differences in national nuclear strategy. As Gray suggested, previously the Soviet Union's formulation of strategy had been likened to a 'loose cannon rolling around on a ship', when in reality, it merely differed from the American way.<sup>6</sup> This stimulated a proliferation of research into the cultural conditions underlying US and Soviet nuclear strategy.

However, in a collection of work that emerged in the mid-1990s, Johnston drew attention to inadequacies in the first generation approach. Most significantly, it was criticised for invoking such a broad and all-encompassing definition of culture that it became difficult to establish anything as non-cultural. This would make it extremely difficult to test a strategic cultural model against a non-cultural one. More generally, the notion that one could identify unique and persistent national strategic cultures to explain all strategic choices, was seen to be dangerously deterministic.

This has provoked Gray into providing a 'belated development of first generation enquiry'.<sup>7</sup> He bases his challenge to Johnston on a refusal to see any disjuncture between strategic culture and behaviour. For Gray, strategic culture, as context, is that which surrounds and gives meaning to strategic behaviour. Thus the behaviour of a security community is affected by culturally shaped or 'enculturated' people, organisations, procedures and weapons. Johnston's mistake, according to Gray, is to conceive of culture as distinct among conflicting explanations for strategic choice. For Gray, this is not credible simply because there is no conceptual space for explanations of behaviour beyond strategic culture because all strategic behaviour is effected by human beings who cannot help but be cultural agents.

Gray argues that 'strategic culture provides a context for understanding, rather than explanatory causality'.<sup>8</sup> So we might view it as an interpretive prism through

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Poore, *Strategic Culture and Non-Nuclear Weapon Outcomes: The Cases of Australia, South Africa and Sweden* (Ph.D thesis, University of Southampton, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Colin Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Hamilton Press, 1986), p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Gray, 'Strategic Culture as Context', p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.

which decision-makers view the strategic landscape. It is always there, both within individuals and institutions and it should be considered both as a 'shaping context for behaviour and a constituent of that behaviour'.<sup>9</sup>

However, as Gray's analysis unfolds, his contextual framework becomes increasingly more problematic as he attempts to accommodate the causal properties of other non-cultural variables. Gray suggests that strategic culture need not dictate a particular course of action, indeed 'other domestic and external variables' such as physical and political geography, frequently will prohibit such behaviour. Yet if culture is context, then is Gray suggesting that these other non-cultural variables are operating without context? Or can we talk of many other contexts? If there are other contexts then is it possible to have an interpretive cultural context in tandem with a causal or explanatory non-cultural context? If it is, then surely the importance of strategic culture would be undermined, a conclusion that Gray would presumably avoid.

Elsewhere, Gray suggests that there are other physical or material reasons why particular dominant strategic cultures emerge. Yet this implies that these factors exist without a cultural context or that there is something prior to the shaping context of culture. Another example of this confusion emerges when Gray discusses the idea that in pressurised situations individuals or organisations are more likely to react according to 'cultural instinct'.<sup>10</sup> This might suggest that in some situations actors can behave *more* culturally than in others and hence, that there is somehow a context within a cultural context.

Gray stresses that while culture provides a context it does not cause strategic behaviour. For example, strategic culture explains why the continental role which Britain was forced to adopt during World War I was psychologically anathema to it, but does not explain why Britain chose to wage continental war in those years. This is because strategy has many dimensions of which culture is only one. Indeed Gray groups strategy's dimensions into three clusters, with culture residing in the first category of 'People and Politics'. Again we must make the assumption that categories two and three elude any sort of strategic cultural context.

The obvious point here is that either culture is everywhere and within everyone, or it is a distinctive variable that can be distinguished from other non-cultural influences. Gray states that culture as context 'can provide understanding of what behaviour means',<sup>11</sup> but it remains unclear from his analysis whether he regards these other factors, which apparently lie outside the strategic cultural context, as having less meaning or no meaning at all.

At this point Johnston lodges his response. He suggests that by 'accidentally conceding' that behaviour can be separable from an *a priori* strategic culture, it becomes obvious that other, non-strategic culture variables can explain this behaviour. How would we know this? For Johnston the only answer is to test for the causality in cultural and non-cultural variables in determining outcomes.

In *Cultural Realism* Johnston pursues the Goldstein-Keohane approach of pitting his strategic culture approach against a "pure" materialist power maximising model'

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

and in the process assumes that some strategic behaviours are independent of cultural constructs.<sup>12</sup> However, in a chapter written for the *Culture of National Security*, Johnston confronts this issue more critically and concludes that a 'materialist versus ideational' juxtaposition might not be tenable since materialist hypotheses are 'ontologically and epistemologically problematic'.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of this conclusion, Johnston concerns himself with identifying and measuring the effects of rival ideational (more specifically cultural) hypotheses.

Should we seek to avoid confronting the relationship between the material and the cultural so readily? I would argue that Gray's strategic culture as context provides us with a far more credible framework for addressing this issue than Johnston suggests. Strategists and their institutions cannot be acultural and hence will continuously perceive and interpret the material realm culturally. The problem for Gray is that he seems to imply that material variables possess an independent causality, which does not fit with his interpretive claims. I would invite him to consider adopting a 'context all the way down' approach whereby strategic culture continually constitutes and gives meaning to material factors. This constitutive process is boundary-less and cannot be confined to certain strategic factors in the way Gray supposes. To assume otherwise is to undermine any use of strategic culture as context. Johnston claims that this leaves us with the tautological assumption that 'everything matters and everything is connected to everything else'.<sup>14</sup> Yet if strategy cannot fail but be cultural, then non-cultural or material variables can have no meaning outside of the cultures that condition them. Hence a tautology is inevitable: everything cultural does matter and cannot be disconnected from anything else.

### **Issues of theory and method**

Johnston criticises Gray for choosing a definition of culture that locks him into viewing strategic culture as territorially and nationally bounded. This is perhaps the strongest example of Gray's preference for first generation conceptualisations. Johnston suggests that, 'although I studied strategic culture in China, I was pretty careful to establish criteria for determining whether one or more strategic cultures exist within one ethno-territorial space and time'.<sup>15</sup> Yet how can we identify these separate cultural entities in such a way as they can be measured and tested in the way that he advises?

Johnston accuses Gray of descending into 'essentializing national character studies'<sup>16</sup> yet without an essentialist conception of strategic culture it is difficult to envisage how Johnston would set up testable hypotheses. He seeks to test for the effects of different strategic cultures on strategic outcomes as he does in the case of China, yet without stipulating the essence of the 'Parabellum' or 'Mencian' Chinese

<sup>12</sup> Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Johnston, 'Strategic Cultures Revisited', p. 522; Peter Katzenstein (eds.), *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 520.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 522.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

strategic cultures that he describes, how can he ascertain when they are pervasive? Equally, how can he explain when and why new strategic cultures emerge and become dominant?

These methodological issues, associated with any sort of cultural research, provide the biggest hurdle for any attempt to provide a falsifiable theory of strategic culture. For positivist social scientists seeking observable, quantifiable data, culture appears unattractive as an analytical tool since cultural variables are hard to define and operationalise. Johnston seeks to set up a test to establish which strategic cultures cause outcomes, yet how can cultural variables be measured? What criteria can be used to establish why cultural influences arise when and where they do, and how they are internalised by decision-makers?

Johnston raises the possibility of seeking cross-national strategic cultural comparisons, based on the assumption that identities and cultures can be constructed similarly across cases. That there can be similarities is not in dispute. However, surely these similarities can only be elucidated through thick description and insight rather than by searching for and measuring independent cultural variables in the way Johnston suggests.

For ambitious strategic culture protagonists strategic culture provides a direct challenge to the hegemony of realist theorising. However, there are considerable problems with making theoretical distinctions of this sort. Gray's analysis provides evidence that it is quite possible to advocate a strategic culture approach while remaining a realist. Indeed many realists would strongly refute the suggestion that they ignore cultural analysis.<sup>17</sup> More fundamentally, there is reason to suspect that a strategic culture approach is ill-suited to provide the causal explanations necessary to meet realism on the positivist playing field.

Instead, a strategic culture approach should seek to explore the cultural conditions of possibility for realist theories. The strategic cultural context thus constitutes and gives meaning to the material variables that realist theories typically rely on for explanation. This may come as a disappointment for advocates of Johnston's positivist approach. However, in the absence of a theory with which to explain the causal mechanisms whereby particular culture and identities arise and determine outcomes, this may be the only practical way forward.

### **A future for strategic culture?**

It may be as a result of these theoretical and methodological limitations that minimal attention has previously been shown to strategic cultural research. As Peter Katzenstein has suggested, 'most students of national security accord pride of place to material forces that define the balance of power between states. They have no place for intangibles like culture.'<sup>18</sup> This is perhaps reflected in the disorganised and

<sup>17</sup> For example, Morgenthau's discussion of factors such as national character and national morale could be construed as offering a cultural account. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 4th edn. (New York: Knopf, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in John Duffield, *World Power Forsaken: Political Culture, International Institutions and German Security Policy After Unification* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 1.

non-cumulative nature of contemporary strategic culture research. Johnston suggests that there are three generations of research into strategic culture and yet it is difficult to elucidate any meaningful progression towards more credible concepts. The second-generation research of writers such as Bradley Klein seems more concerned with critically unmasking the manipulation of strategic cultures by *élites*, while third generation researchers focus more on military organisational culture than on broader strategic cultures.<sup>19</sup>

So it appears that there is only a very loose association between these generations of research with writers pursuing disparate aims and objectives. It is therefore time to begin working towards a consensus on some basic issues relating to strategic culture, including what it is and how it should be studied. While Johnston is critical of first generation theorists, these writers provide a focus and a clarity that it is frequently absent in contemporary approaches. Gray's culture as context may therefore provide a productive starting point from which to proceed.

Despite the many drawbacks and limitations associated with strategic cultural research that have been highlighted, I would argue that there is much value in pursuing such an approach. Without investigating the cultural context in which decisions are made, we are left with narrow and meaningless insights into strategic behaviour. The Gray-Johnston debate illustrates the futility of thinking about strategic culture in terms of causal explanations and falsifiable theory, whilst confirming the potential of a contextual or constitutive framework. Strategic culturalists should now be urged to generate more empirical research into particular strategic cultural cases through the use of thick description. In doing so, many new insights can be gained into cases where previously rationalist materialist explanations have exerted an over-bearing dominance.

<sup>19</sup> Bradley Klein, 'Hegemony and Strategic Culture: American Power Projection and Alliance Defence Politics', *Review of International Studies*, 14:2 (1988). An example of third generation research would be: Elizabeth Kier, 'Culture and Military Doctrine: France Between the Wars', *International Security*, 19:4 (1995).