**Title: Comparative Strategic Culture**

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**Introduction**

There is enormous intuitive appeal to the idea that, if “culture matters” at some general level, then it must also be important in shaping national security processes and outcomes. There is an extensive academic literature on this issue—often called “strategic culture”—and it serves as a sort of “folk theorem” that practitioners and casual observers of foreign affairs find compelling.

Beyond that, the potential impact of arguments related to strategic culture is tremendous. If culture is a central determinant of strategic behavior, then ahistorical and global theories like “offensive realism” and “neo-liberalism” are inappropriate for understanding foreign policy. Those theories claim that countries in similar strategic or institutional settings will act similarly, regardless of their strategic culture. Similarly, core components of current American foreign policy—the universal attraction of democracy and the utility of deterrent threats in general (to pick just two)—are misguided. Rather, these factors will vary considerably in their applicability to different countries depending on their strategic culture.

Despite the publication of many path-breaking books and scholarly articles on the subject of strategic culture, the research in this area has not cumulated into a coherent, productive field of study. The lack of cumulation is often the result of authors employing often very different conceptions of strategic culture and applying them to a single case study. For instance, the seminal work in this field is a study of Soviet strategic culture in key organizations as it pertains to nuclear affairs.In contrast, a recent addition to the literature examines the role of deeply held national culture as it shapes broad beliefs about the efficacy of force in China. The challenge posed by this lack of cumulation notwithstanding, with renewed policy interest in discerning the motivations and related sources of behavior of hard-to-understand countries such as North Korea, Iran, Syria, Pakistan, India, and China, it is time to take a new look at comparative strategic culture.

To assess the state of the field of strategic cultural studies, the Naval Postgraduate School’s Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC) organized a workshop on Comparative Strategic Culture

on September 21 and 22, 2005. The workshop was part of the second annual Monterey Strategy Seminar. It was initiated and sponsored by the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency’s Advanced System and Concepts Office (DTRA/ASCO) to enable the Center for Contemporary Conflict to bring together a top-notch group of experts and consider the utility and future role for comparative strategic culture theory in U.S. defense strategy. One of the main workshop objectives was to determine whether an approach to “comparative strategic cultures” has promise for yielding insights into threat anticipation and reduction, as well as other policy implications and applications.

Rather than emphasizing one particular approach to strategic culture, the conference featured scholars and practitioners who had vastly different opinions about whether strategic culture was a useful analytical concept, how it could be made more productive, and how best to characterize its definition and analytical role. Beyond that, CCC stepped outside the confines of political science approaches to strategic culture topics to draw on expertise from other disciplines, notably anthropology and political psychology.

The goal of the project was to assess whether a methodologically sound framework for identifying strategic culture that can be used to study a wide range of different countries and societies exists. What is strategic culture? How can it be measured objectively? In what parts of society does it exist? What factors reinforce a strategic culture and what factors produce change in a strategic culture? Under what conditions does strategic culture most affect policy outcomes? To gain a practical handle on these broad questions, the conference featured three sets of case analyses. Scholars debated the concept of strategic culture in the cases of China, Iran, and Pakistan. In each case, the aim was to generate operationalizable definitions of terms, logically sound causal statements, testable hypotheses, and—when applicable—clear policy implications. The goal was to serve as a plausibility probe for a line of research rather than aiming to lay out a final answer for the way in which strategic culture predicts specific behaviors.

This report details the deliberations of the different panels from the conference, and summarizes general findings in the conclusion. Key among the insights established at the conference was the insistence that a better understanding of an adversary’s strategic culture would dramatically increase the likelihood of policy success within a given a region. “Know thy enemy” has taken on an increased significance in the post-9/11 world, and the U.S. government must continue to better understand how to operationalize that maxim. Although concepts of strategic culture have been introduced as far back as the 1960s, culture—as a tool of policy analysis—has repeatedly taken a back seat to realist, power politics models of foreign policy theory. This conference resoundingly emphasized the rational and contemporary need to reexamine culture as a legitimate tool of policy analysis.

The conference also highlighted multiple ways in which concepts of strategic culture could be better defined and analyzed, though no consensual definition of the concept was ever reached. Many of the scholars in attendance presented their own schematics and representations of how strategic culture can be divided and strengthened to better meet the needs of contemporary strategic culture systems.

On that same note, the conference successfully depicted the need to view culture not as single system, but as a conglomerate of co-existing variables, with each major regional and cultural area resonating with its own strategic culture. There is no one pass/fail test for strategic culture, and therefore no single way in which it can be defined or tested. The regions of China, Pakistan, and Iran each separately possess their own distinct strategic culture. Commonalities of cultural traits and categories can be found among each region, but each state also possesses very distinct and very strategic cultural peculiarities that—if properly understood and addressed—could assist the U.S. government in achieving regionally pursued objectives and policies.

**The Importance of Culture in International Security Policy**

Dr. Kerry Kartchner, of DTRA/ASCO, kicked off the event with a presentation that argued that a thorough understanding of strategic culture is vital to the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. It is often the case that U.S. policies are misunderstood, miscommunicated, or ill-informed by the local and regional cultural contexts in which officials try to execute policy. According to the 2004 Defense Science Board Study on Strategic Communications, Kartchner indicated that hostility to U.S. national security goals and policies is undermining U.S. power, influence, and strategic alliances. Potentially some of this hostility might be driven by a lack of understanding of the cultural and regional context for U.S. policy. If this is the case, the U.S. Defense Department needs to better understand the cultural contexts that U.S. national security and foreign policy interacts with, so that it is be better able to achieve U.S. defense policy goals.

Kartchner opened with an important question to the audience that framed the sponsor’s interest in the topic: “Does culture even matter?” He went on to query whether or not culture can shape behavior and define values in discernible and measurable ways, and asked which behaviors and values are most subject to cultural influence, or find their origins most firmly rooted in cultural grounds? He noted that the answers to these questions were of critical importance to national policy making.

In the discussions that followed, many agreed that culture does, in fact, matter. That said, there was less agreement about whether the study of strategic culture would lead to a comprehensive enough understanding to allow for prediction of other countries’ behaviors. However, without that, the policy relevance of this approach (for the U.S. government or others) would be greatly curtailed. Resolving that dispute will be critical for moving this research agenda forward.

**Levels of Analysis and Definitions**

The first panel introduced the field of strategic culture and featured literature reviews by Ms. Elizabeth Stone of the Naval Postgraduate School, Dr. Jeffrey Lantis of the University of Wooster, and Dr. Darryl Howlett of Southampton University. Each speaker agreed that a consensual definition of strategic culture was not available.

Across the literature, strategic culture is defined in many different ways. When culture became a trendy academic subject during the 1970s, some theorists emphasized the ideational roots of

culture, thus necessitating its study from a sociological and psychological perspective. These theorists, who came from a wide array of cross-disciplinary fields, including anthropology, sociology, and psychology, posited culture to be “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.” Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist whose work political scientists draw upon heavily and repeatedly in this field, defined culture in by focusing on individual-specific variables, and had a very broad, complex, and porous conception of culture.

Other policy-focused theorists, like Colin Gray, would apply a concept of culture to the study of security affairs by defining strategic culture as “modes of thought and action with respect to [force], derived from perception of national historical experience, aspiration for self characterization, and from state-distinctive experiences.”Notable in this approach is a focus less on individuals, and more on how a state’s national historical experience generates ideas and actions on issues of national grand strategy and policy.

Still other theorists emerged, who either did not fully accept all the definitions of strategic culture that came before them or disagreed with them fundamentally. Some pushed for strategic culture to became an even more focused concept, as in the 1995 definition as “different predominant strategic preferences rooted in early formative experiences of state, influenced to some degree by philosophical, political, cultural, and cognitive characteristics of state and its elites.” Other definitions along these same lines highlighted the “fundamental and enduring assumptions about role of war (both interstate and intrastate) in human affairs and the efficacy of applying force held by political and military elites in a country.”

Recognizing this lack of definitional consensus, many theorists at the CCC conference insisted that an agreed-upon definition would be necessary if strategic culture were to ever develop into a viable policy framework. Unfortunately achieving this is quite a challenge due to the range of issues that divide scholars. In particular, two separate sets of issues each need to be addressed:

1. First, where does the culture in question lie?

2. Second, where does the behavior that it shapes exist?

At the conference Ms. Stone presented matrix developed at CCC outlining the way this might be arrayed. It visually displays the wide variation of approaches taken by scholars of strategic culture.

Along the vertical axis are three possible levels where the particular culture in question might exist. That is, is the culture in question global or merely in existence within a particular organization within a state? Across the horizontal axis are the possible areas that might be affected by culture. Thus, strategic culture might shape a nation’s military doctrine. At the other extreme, it might shape even the predominant form security policy at the international level by all (or most) states. The instinctual view of strategic culture would see nations possessing cultural beliefs that shape their national grand strategy (i.e., the cell in the chart above that holds Alastair Iain Johnston’s classic work (*Cultural Realism* (Princeton, 1995)). However, as this chart makes clear, this is only one view of strategic culture and not necessarily the most commonly studies or even the most accurate. It is important to recognize the range of existing work, even if that complicates analysis and cumulation.

Dr. Jeffrey Lantis highlighted the fact that strategic culture has had many competing and complimentary influences, such as sociology, political psychology, anthropology, and security studies. He ultimately observed that contemporary scholars seem to agree that distinct political cultures may exist, but definitions still blur the line between preference formation, values, and state behaviors.

Dr. Lantis added that there is inherent explanatory and analytical value in viewing strategic cultures as a hierarchy, and evaluating elite-level discourses, military organizational cultures, and public/social cultures as distinct, but interrelated, realms of strategic thought. Also, Dr. Anne Clunan of the Naval Postgraduate School, cautioned against just focusing on elites as sources of strategic culture, and reminded the group that scholars and policymakers must also look at the societies in which the elites are embedded. Societies reveal power relationship within and among elites and between elites and the greater society, and can possibly reveal how some state decisions are shaped more by culture and other state decisions are made and are not at all influenced by culture. Adding to this notion, Dr. Darryl Howlett reminded the audience that in attempting to define and identify the sources of strategic culture, it is very important to understand that strategic culture can be influenced by both material and ideational factors. Those most frequently cited are: geography, climate and resources; history and experience; political structure; the nature of organizations involved in defense; myths and symbols; key texts that inform actors of appropriate strategic action; and transnational norms, generational change and the role of technology.

In the end, the group was unable to agree upon a consensual definition of strategic culture, or even if a consensual definitional was required at all. The utility of dividing up concepts, explanations, and definitions of strategic culture into some sort of hierarchy of typology was, however, deemed useful and necessary if strategic culture was to advance as a tool of academic and policy analysis.

**Pakistani Strategic Culture**

The first country case study panel focused on the strategic culture of Pakistan. In it, Pakistani Brig. Gen (retd). Feroz Hassan Khan highlighted the evolving nature of strategic cultures when he pointed out that what might appear as “culture” could well be evolving trends within the society, reactions to regional or local threats, and repercussions of events elsewhere. Khan also cautioned that for many states, there is no permanent strategic culture, as some newly formed states, like Pakistan, are still struggling to define its own strategic culture and are heavily influenced by day-to-day domestic and international events.

Khan also pointed out that Pakistan domestically faces an identity crisis as to whether it is a homogenous Muslim state or an Islamic state, and faces ethnic and sectarian clashes and disturbing civil-military relations, and—though short in history as a nation-state—it has had an extraordinary amount of crises and has needed to bear a heavy burden of security challenges. These everyday realities for Pakistan have helped shaped its still-emerging strategic culture over the last sixty years.

Dr. Peter Lavoy of the Naval Postgraduate School, laid out an alternative framework to conceptualize ideational causes of international policy both in Pakistan and more generally. Lavoy sees a hierarchy of different “strategic myths” that interact with material constraints and the preferences of particular leaders. For Lavoy, this has the advantage of providing an escape from some of the definitional problems found in the study of culture. Rather, he counsels a focus on more tangible subjects of analysis, such as individuals, their beliefs, and the ways in which these

beliefs become entrenched in rules, laws, bureaucratic missions and standard operating procedures, etc.

Lavoy then applied this framework to a number of recent turning points in Pakistani foreign policy. In doing so he concluded that it provided superior explanatory power compared to either a traditional strategic culture-based explanation or a realpolitik based one.

**Chinese Strategic Culture**

On a panel discussing the strategic culture of China, Dr. Andrew Scobell of the Army War College, remarked that strategic culture should be thought of as a typology or hierarchy, and insisted that the lines of strategic culture become very blurred above the operational level and at the level of grand strategy. Nevertheless, Scobell highlighted a “Cult of the Defense” that he argues plays an important role in Chinese thinking about their security policy. As Scobell argues “Chinese elites fervently believe that China is under the sway of a unique peace-loving, non-expansionist, defensive-minded strategic tradition.” Scobell nevertheless claims, however, that when explaining actions, rather than rhetoric, Chinese leaders are more traditionally realist. As he writes in his book, he sees “a Beijing ready to employ military force assertively against perceived external or internal threats all the while insisting that China possesses a cultural aversion to using force, doing so only defensively and solely as a last resort.” Scobell suggests that the dialectic between this realist tradition and the pacifist norms in the deep culture of China help to deepen our understanding of Chinese security policy.

Dr. Christopher Twomey of the Naval Postgraduate School presented a less sweeping view of strategic culture in China. He posited that it would be advantageous to view strategic culture from the level of military elites and national strategy. He insisted that one can apply a cultural lens to the study of Chinese security policy through examination of the perceptual effects of military doctrine, and reiterated the importance of PLA doctrine in shaping the way China viewed its interaction with the United States in the past. For instance, during the Korean War, the Chinese doctrine of People’s War greatly affected Beijing’s views about American intentions and the

capabilities that she might bring to bear on the Korean Peninsula. These perceptions often differed markedly from American views, and led to important—and unnecessary—escalations in the war. Similarly, Chinese views about the utility of asymmetric strategies (or Assassin’s Mace strategies, as they are popularized) will likely lead Chinese leaders to a degree of overconfidence and, potentially, to misinterpret American signals should conflict arise.

Dr. Twomey argued that this (relatively narrow) approach to strategic culture has significant advantages in terms of objectivity and clarity of causal statements that can enhance the utility of the study of strategic culture to policymakers and scholars alike.

**Iranian Strategic Culture**

During a panel examining the strategic culture of Iran, Dr. Vali Nasr of the Naval Postgraduate School and Mr. Willis Stanley of the Institute of Public Policy offered different interpretations about where to look to understand Iranian strategic culture and what are the most salient features of that culture.

Stanley echoed a caution Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, Dr. Stephen Cambone, said in 2004 that “deterring future adversaries will require a detailed understanding of their goals, motivations, history, networks, relationships, and all the dimensions of human political behavior, on a scale broader and deeper than today’s.” Stanley emphasized policy analysts must take a multidisciplinary study of an opponent, and look at and opponent’s interests, strategic profile, default patterns, and historical patterns so that insight can be gained into an opponent’s behavior during a particular scenario.

Stanley focused on how historically influenced, and thus consistent, Iranian strategic culture was. He also focused on the role of religion and the influences of ancient Persian and Islamic cultures to explain the broader patterns of contemporary Iranian political and strategic policies. Stanley believed that a revolutionary interpretation of Shia Islam, the influences of Persian culture and Islamic exceptionalism, extremely complex, consistent, and far-reaching familial relationships, and a continuing belief that Iran is far superior than its neighbors creates a perpetual and distinct Iranian strategic culture. Stanley also felt that Iran’s leaders understand U.S. positions and policies, but misinterpret them. They also believe the United States is not a reliable partner and that the United States constantly betrays its allies. Overall, Stanley characterized Iranian strategic culture as more or less consistent and argued that contemporary events were absorbed into an already fixed strategic Iranian mindset.

While agreeing that Iran’s ancient history still plays a large role in contemporary strategic thought, Nasr emphasized the influence that modern changes have had on Iran and its leadership. Events such as the Iran-Iraq War, Iran’s push for regional hegemony as its neighbors become weaker, and Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons to secure its new regional power status are all a part of the calculus that provides insight into Iranian strategic thinking. Nasr emphasized the major changes Iranian leadership and society has and will continue to have in the future.

The slight discrepancies in these two presentations only reiterated the theme raised above: the lack of a consensual definition and the disagreement on which levels of analysis better embody and display the true strategic cultures of states.

**Continuity or Change?**

Is culture static? Is it malleable? How permeable are cultural boundaries and influences? These questions pervaded the conference’s discussions on strategic culture. Among the participants of the conference, there was disagreement as to whether or not strategic culture was a static and continuous concept, or a constantly evolving, permeable variable.

During a panel highlighting the academic implications and multidisciplinary perspectives of strategic culture, Dr. Hugh Gusterson of MIT highlighted the Achilles heel of both attempting to define strategic culture, as well as attempting to use strategic cultural analysis in defense and security studies. He claimed that issues that depend on or are influence by culture cannot be predictive. He reminded the audience that, “As you write about the culture of a people and as they read your writings, their cultures change; human sciences can never be predictive because they investigate entities with consciousness.”

Gusterson went on to remind the audience that culture is complex, descriptions are partial and subjective, and descriptions change what it is they are trying to describe once they describe it. In his opinion, not only can a definition of strategic culture never be widely agreed upon by scholars, but strategic culture may, in fact, not be definable at all. Indeed he noted that the mainstream work in anthropology had moved away from attempting to define or measure culture at a societal level.

Attempting to move beyond the pessimism implied by Gusterson’s comments and as a way to integrate across the different levels of strategic cultures discussed in the conference, Professor Jeannie Johnson of Utah State University laid out one view of how analysts might think about strategic culture .

Her graphic depicted the many inputs and outputs that could influence a state’s overall strategic thinking. Her perception centered on a systems level approach, and emphasized how permeable all levels of strategic culture can be. Johnson emphasized the need to view strategic culture as an ever-changing and evolving system.

Johnson reiterated that broad theories of human nature do not, by themselves, allow us to make short-term predictions about country-by country-foreign policy behavior, and scholars need to keep in mind that definitions of strategic culture must be dynamic and will contain embedded contradictions.

Dr. Lantis rejoined the discussion to emphasize that culture is an evolving system of shared meaning that governs perceptions, communications, and actions, and offers little in the way of testable hypotheses. While asking whether or not strategic cultures can evolve, he emphasized that strategic culture possessed a strong degree of continuity, and highlighted that more often than not past learning becomes sedimented into the collective consciousness of a population or group. Lantis also raised the important concept of external shocks to a culture group, which sometimes drastically alter and force a reconsideration of historical norms. This implies that strategic culture must be thought of and analyzed as a fluid, continuously evolving concept.

Dr. Theo Farrell of King’s College, London, echoed this notion when he concluded that strategic culture must always be viewed and analyzed as an open system. However, Farrell argued that culture itself is more or less consistent. He admitted that both internal and external shocks occur—and the impact of such shocks are hugely important—but that culture more often than not settles and continues on as a constant norm. Farrell emphasized that if we are ever to attempt to use strategic culture as an analytical independent variable, we must view it as a fixed, continuous concept.

In juxtaposition—but not in opposition—to examples of how strategic culture must be thought of as constantly evolving and always changing, Dr. Robert Hickson raised the important examples of the continuity and coherency of both Jewish and Chinese cultures. Both of these cultures, and subsequently the strategic cultures of the states most influence by these traditions, possess an enduring longevity—even with the enormous numbers of external and internal shocks the cultures have undergone. He asked whether or not we can learn more about the debate between continuity and change in strategic culture from societies and groups such as these? Although such a continuity would certainly ease the task of using strategic culture, it is notable that most other participants in the conference saw a much more fluid form of culture in the cases they knew best.

**Conclusions, Or the Way Forward…**

The conference raised more questions than it answered. This was by design. The organizers at CCC view this as the first step of a longer-term research endeavor. That said, several critical conclusions emerged from the conference.

First, for all of strategic culture’s intuitive appeal as a concept, it remains profoundly difficult to make objective statements about a particular country or group. Thus, a strategic cultural approach can easily mask for the use of superficial stereotypes about another group. Aside from gratuitous complaints about the lack of “political correctness” of such an approach, a more profound danger is also posed. Superficial stereotypes are often out of date and inaccurate when applied to individuals. In interpersonal relations, these problems might merely lead to repugnant behavior. However, in international relations deep misperceptions can lead to unnecessary conflict. In the nuclear era, such errors might be catastrophic.

Ironically, utilization of an analytically weak concept of strategic culture might worsen the very problem it is intended to solve. That is, the intuitive insight of strategic cultural approaches is based on the fact that people in different cultures might think differently about important issues of national security. In order to recognize the interests and be able to communicate with others in the international system, it is important to understand how they think. However, if superficial cultural stereotypes provide the supposed lens through which the other side is evaluated, those errors might be compounded rather than mitigated.

One of the points that emerged strongly in the conference was the malleability of culture. Different national leaders chose from a huge range of cultural narratives to garner support for their policies in any national context. National cultures change over time in response to material and ideational factors. Different groups within society have different cultures and they may shape security policy

at various different points in a particular crisis. These all pose deep challenges for the creation of a predictive model of foreign policy behavior based on strategic culture.

If culture matters in important ways, but we cannot accurately characterize culture at any particular time, this has disturbing implications, not for the study of strategic culture but for the study of international security. This means that scholars of strategic culture, and international security more generally, need to be much more modest in their claims, particularly with regard to making predictions. It does not matter that policymakers demand prediction. Of course, from an academic perspective this would also be valued. However, if objective analysis cannot be conducted about an important source of policy, promises of predictive power will seduce but not advance a nation’s ability to achieve its goals.

In order to move forward, it will be critical to assess whether some aspects of strategic cultural studies are less susceptible to these problems. As noted above in the matrix laying out the range of approaches, scholars assessing the effect of culture of international security vary considerably in the types of culture they study and the types of effects they predict. Some areas within that

matrix are less prone to the problems of objective assessment than others. Indeed, some of the most interesting current work on the topic takes a very narrow approach, looking within particular organizations rather than trying to characterize “national” cultures. Other work, focusing more broadly on the way national cultures can shape beliefs about national interests, abandons prediction as a goal. In order to find a middle ground between these two—that is to create a field of comparative, national strategic cultural studies—will require resolution of the issues that have stymied the entire fields of anthropology and sociology: how to objective characterize the cultural beliefs held by large groups of individuals.

The more modest approaches, outlined by the narrower works cited above, can be used in the interim to advance our understanding of other countries’ behaviors. While not as sweeping in the scope of their applicability, they do provide viable strategies for examining the beliefs of particular military and organizational cultures in foreign countries in ways that allow for the relatively high demands of prediction needed to anticipate and influence threats to U.S. interests.