

STRATEGIC CULTURE

Assigned Reading:

- Patrick Hinton (2020) **Strategic Culture**, *The RUSI Journal*, 165:4, 80-87, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2020.1816736
- RAND Report – Understanding Russian Strategic Culture & Low-Yield Nuclear Threat

Author:

Patrick Hinton is a British Army Artillery Officer who joined in 2014. He holds a BA in History and Politics from the University of Warwick, an MA in International Relations from the University of Staffordshire, and an MBA from the University of Warwick. He received the 2019 Trench Gascoigne Award for his original writing on defence issues, specifically for his essay on Strategic Culture. His research interests include the integration of remote and autonomous systems into land forces, as well as the personnel issues facing modern military forces.

Summary of Reading for 01 Oct 25 titled

Strategic Culture: In Defiance of a Structural World Order by Patrick Hinton.

Patrick Hinton's article challenges the notion that the so-called rules-based international order has ever been genuinely stable. He argues that states do not all react similarly under pressure, as realist theories suggest, but instead interpret the world based on their own histories, cultures, and identities. To illustrate this, he traces the development of the idea of strategic culture. The first wave emerged in the 1970s, with Jack Snyder's work demonstrating that Soviet nuclear thinking was shaped by its distinctive historical context. A second wave in the 1980s focused on how elites and ruling groups deliberately influence strategic narratives. By contrast, a third wave in the 1990s refined the concept by exploring traditions, texts, and national identity.

Hinton recognises the true strengths of the strategic culture approach. It adds nuance, helps explain why states behave differently, and even offers some predictive value because cultural patterns develop slowly. It also encourages countries to reflect on their own biases, which can prevent blind spots, something the United States failed to do in Iraq and Afghanistan, where cultural realities were ignored. Critics, on the other hand, argue that the concept can be too broad and risk becoming a catch-all explanation. Hinton admits this but insists that strategic culture offers insights that structural theories, such as neorealism, overlook. He concludes that although it shouldn't be seen as a perfect theory, strategic culture is crucial if we are to understand why states behave as they do in the real world.

Authors:

The RAND report was authored by Mattias Eken, Kiran Suman-Chauhan, Beatrice Aubert, and Paul van Hooff, researchers at RAND Europe. Their work focuses on European security, nuclear policy, and the influence of strategic culture on defence planning. Collectively, they possess expertise in Russian security studies, deterrence theory, and transatlantic strategy. Their 2025 study examines how Russia's history, worldview, and strategic culture shape its reliance on low-yield nuclear weapons, offering insights for NATO and EU policymakers.

Summary of Reading for 01 Oct 25 titled

RAND Report: Understanding Russian Strategic Culture & Low-Yield Nuclear Threat.

The RAND Europe report examines how Russia's security strategy affects the use of low-yield, or non-strategic, nuclear weapons. The authors argue that Russia's history of invasions has created a siege mentality, where nuclear forces are seen as essential for survival and preserving its great power status. In this mindset, smaller nuclear weapons are not ignored; they are central to Russia's approach to deterrence and escalation. What's noteworthy is the deliberate ambiguity in Russian doctrine: it does not establish clear red lines, and this uncertainty is intentionally used to keep "opponents" guessing. The report also emphasises that Russia does not think in rigid categories, such as nuclear versus conventional. Instead, it views deterrence as a continuous, multifaceted process across multiple domains simultaneously.

A key warning is that Western analysts often fall into "mirror-imaging", assuming that Moscow thinks the same way we do. Russia's approach is shaped by its own cultural emphasis on insecurity, depth, and the symbolic power of nuclear arms. While Ukraine demonstrates how this manifests, the report isn't really about one war; it's about the deeper patterns underlying it. For NATO and the EU, the lesson is to expect ambiguity, prepare for different escalation paths, and avoid misreading Russian intentions. Ultimately, the authors conclude that Russia's reliance on low-yield nuclear weapons reflects not just military calculation but also a cultural worldview that views these weapons as central to its security and status.

The following questions are to be used by the SRD lead to guide the discussion during the SRD.

Question 1. To what extent is Strategic Culture helpful in explaining strategic behaviour in the real world?

Question 2. What are the strengths and limitations of the concept of 'Strategic Culture'?

Question 3. Does an understanding of Russian 'Strategic Culture' provide a valuable tool to help us understand decision-making in Moscow?

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