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Strategic Culture and Divergent Security Policies of European States

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Shaping Strategic Behavior: Understanding the Diverging Security Policies and Practices of European States through the Concept of Strategic Culture

Introduction

For a long time, culture has had little place in security studies. However, the concept of strategic culture has gained ground in security studies, after Jack Snyder first introduced it in 1977 (Snyder, 1977:8-9). The study of strategic culture has grown popular in recent years, and is conventionally characterized as 'the set of beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, norms, world views and patterns of habitual behavior held by strategic decision-makers regarding the political objectives of war, and the best way to achieve [those objectives]' (Biava, Drent & Herd, 2011: 1228). However, it remains opaque what the concept of strategic culture comprises concretely, what it can do, and if it is at all useful to explain why the strategic behavior of states diverges (Poore, 2003: 279).

This essay will evaluate how useful the concept of strategic culture is in explaining the divergence in security policies and practices of European states. The essay will necessarily start with a theoretical discussion about if and how strategic culture can be used to explain the strategic behavior of states. First, I will argue that it is theoretically impossible to essentialize strategic culture and to regard it as an independent causal factor for particular strategic behavior. Rather, I argue that strategic culture nevertheless has utility, and must be regarded as the context that constitutes strategic decision-making. Second, I propose to disaggregate strategic culture to engage more concretely with the strategic culture of European states. Third, I show that the United Kingdom (UK), France and Germany have different strategic behaviors, because their diverging strategic cultures have constituted strategic decision-makers differently. Fourth, I argue that a multiplicity of other factors that influence strategic decision-making exist; strategic culture should not be regarded as one of many factors, but rather as the context that shapes how other factors are acted upon. Finally, I will conclude that the concept of strategic culture is highly useful for explaining the diverging security policies and practices of European states, because it provides a reason for why strategic behavior is resistant to change; it shapes trajectories of appropriate behavior; and it constrains strategic decision-makers, thus shaping strategic decision-making.

What is Strategic Culture?

An analysis of the usefulness of strategic culture must necessarily depart from a theoretical discussion, as the utility of strategic culture for security analysis depends on whether one believes the concept should be used to 'explain', or to 'understand' strategic decision-making (Meyer, 2005a: 526). The 'explaining-understanding' dichotomy refers to two distinct approaches to international politics: 'explaining' emphasizes the structural and causal conditioning of international politics, whereas 'understanding' focuses on the conditioning of actors by factors such as rules, intentions and context (Hollis & Smith, 1990: 7-9). This translates to the question whether strategic culture *determines* or *shapes* the strategic decision-making of states (Biava, Drent & Herd, 2011: 1228).

Alistair Johnston takes the view that strategic culture determines strategic decision-making. Johnston regards strategic culture as a potentially important independent variable that can be used to predict strategic choice

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(Johnston, 1995: 46). Moreover, he argues that strategic culture should be devised into a notion that can be distinguished from non-cultural variables (Johnston, 1995: 45). It seems compelling to approach strategic culture in this way, as it allows one to assess the comparative advantage of a particular strategic culture and to contrast cultural factors with other causal factors (Meyer, 2005a: 527). There are, however, limits to Johnston's approach. It is impossible to distinguish strategic culture from non-strategic variables; culture is among the most difficult notions to essentialize, and it would thus be a Herculean task to operationalize strategic culture. Finding observable and quantifiable data to prove the existence of a particular strategic culture would be virtually impossible (Poore, 2003: 283). Thus, the concept of strategic culture is less useful in the sense that it cannot be employed to say that if a state has strategic culture *x*, it will engage in behavior *y*.

Colin Gray, who suggests that strategic culture 'provides context for understanding, rather than explanatory causality for behavior', takes an opposing view (Gray, 1999: 49). As explained above, using strategic culture for causal theorizing is senseless due to the *sui generis* nature of culture (Glenn, 2009: 539). Strategic culture is, however, still necessary for a proper understanding of a state's strategic decision-making. Gray points out that 'everything a security community does is encultured' (Gray, 1999: 52). All strategic decision-making is carried out by human beings and their institutions, and no strategic decision-maker can approach security issues with a *tabula rasa*. Rather, every human being involved in decision-making is an encultured being with beliefs, assumptions and norms that constitute their knowledgeable practice. Strategic behavior cannot be without culture, because culture is what gives meaning to practice (Gray, 1999: 52). Hence, strategic culture is essential to understand a state's strategic behavior; it is an ever-present factor that helps to shape strategic decision-making (Booth, 2005: 25).

If strategic culture is what 'gives meaning' to strategic behavior, but cannot predict strategic behavior positivistically, how can it be used? Strategic culture can provide reasons for action. The concept can be used to map what Christoph Meyer calls 'a corridor of 'normal' or 'probable' behavior of states' (Meyer, 2005a: 528). Understanding a state's strategic culture, and thus how actors are constituted, enables one to improve predictions of strategic behavior in accordance with that culture. Hence, in a sense, reasons can be causes (Adler, 1997: 329-330). While it cannot be said that strategic culture determines strategic decision-making, understanding a state's strategic culture can provide the insight that strategic behavior *a*, being appropriate within the strategic culture, is much more likely to happen than inappropriate strategic behavior *b*. As ideas about the appropriateness of the use of force often differ greatly, strategic culture is essential for understanding why strategic decision-making is shaped differently in different states.

Not only can ideas about appropriateness differ greatly, they are also very resistant to change. Although strategic culture is not permanent, it is very stable. A strategic culture often outlives its era of inception and can at best only be marginally affected by political leaders (Longhurst, 2004: 17). This is because strategic culture is strongly rooted in the collective memory. Historical experience is especially important: 'traumatic defeats, oppression, betrayal and exclusion, guilt as well as military triumphs plant themselves deep into collective memories as 'lessons learnt' and 'beliefs held'' (Meyer, 2005: 51). While strategic culture may gradually evolve, it will not change frequently or radically, as long as no event of sufficient magnitude occurs which requires thorough revision (Gray, 2007: 14).

Using Strategic Culture

As has become clear from the above, semi-permanent norms, ideas and beliefs about the use of force that constitute strategic decision-makers, necessarily impact the security policies and practices of states. In order to assess the utility of strategic culture more concretely, it will be considered how historical experience and narratives of European states have shaped unique 'socially transmitted, identity-derived norms, ideas and patterns of behavior about what is appropriate and legitimate concerning [the use of force] for security goals' (Biava, Drent & Herd: 2011, 1235).

However, as an aggregate concept, strategic culture is too broad to be used as an analytical tool. Therefore, it must be disaggregated. Meyer indicates strategic norms that can be used to uncover a state's strategic culture, including: (i) goals for the use of force; (ii) preferred mode of cooperation; and (iii) threshold for domestic and international authorization (Meyer: 2005, 530). To disaggregate strategic culture thusly is necessarily artificial, but it provides us with the analytical tools to engage more concretely with the strategic cultures of states. I will use the norms to guide

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my discussion of how diverging strategic cultures have differently constituted decision-makers in the UK, France and Germany. Reference will be made to the norms to highlight areas of divergence, but not all norms are addressed in reference to each individual state mentioned above.

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Just how important strategic culture is for understanding becomes clear when it is considered why European states are still deeply divided on strategic issues (Lindley-French, 2002: 791). Despite some convergence, strong differences remain. Strategic culture provides insight in why this may be so.

The strategic cultures of most European states were formed in the Second World War (WWII) and early Cold War years (Hyde-Price, 2004: 326). The legacy of this era is still present in the form of strategic culture in many European states. The three most powerful European Union (EU) Members, the UK, France and Germany have strongly diverging ideas about the appropriateness of the use of force. If the strategic behavior of the UK and France are considered, one might be at a loss why these states have pursued different transatlantic policies, despite their comparable power capabilities (Hyde-Price, 2004: 326). The UK and France are similar in many ways: both states have nuclear weapons; are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC); and are former colonial powers in relative decline. Why, then, was the Blair administration the most important ally of the United States (US) during its invasion of Iraq in 2003, while President Chirac vehemently opposed it (Treacher, 2011: 95)? A partial answer is that British and French history have constituted strategic decision-makers differently.

The UK emerged out of WWII regarding itself a victor (Dorman, 2011:88). In the ensuing years, the UK strengthened its relationship with the US. The experience of interoperability from WWII, combined with the UK's nuclear capability and US extended deterrence, established a special Anglo-American relationship (Miskimmon, 2004: 276). As a result of the British experience during WWII, the idea that security issues can be effectively addressed through the use of military force became rooted. Despite losing its empire, the UK still regards itself as an important power that should have the ability to influence decisions at the world stage; it is committed to 'punching at its weight' (Dorman, 2011: 87). Moreover, the UK remains committed to interoperability with the US to be able to respond to crises quickly, and will not get involved in multilateral operations without the US (Miskimmon, 2004: 290). In addition to bilateral agreements with the United States, NATO remains the British organization of choice, as the United States' involvement is highly valued (Dorman, 2011: 91).

France's history draws a different picture. France came out of WWII in a weak position, and reliant on US Marshall aid. In the years after the war, France was further humiliated by collapse of colonial ambitions in Indo-China, the Suez embarrassment and the crisis in Algeria (Treacher, 2011: 96). President Charles de Gaulle turned around these profound feelings by reasserting French confidence, and reestablishing France as a global power (Treacher, 2011: 97). From past humiliation France drew the lesson it should retain the capability to act autonomously. At the core of French identity is the belief France is still a great power that must strive to have a prominent position in the international realm. Generally, France favors to work through multilateral organizations in which it formally (UN) or informally (EU) holds a position of relative power (Irondelle & Besancon, 2010: 24).

Now, taking into account the strategic culture of the UK and France, an essential insight in their respective behavior can be uncovered. While both France and the UK believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and also believed force could be used for the goal of disarming Iraq, they had strongly divergent ideas about the preferred mode of cooperation and about international authorization. For France, these issues were 'more important than whether or not there was a war' (Irondelle & Besancon, 2010: 108). French strategic decision-makers were constrained by culture, in the sense that to them, unilateralist US action was wholly unacceptable as it ignored the French feelings of *grandeur*, and did not acknowledge France's prominent position on the global stage. The British, on the other hand, strongly supported the US. While a significant share of the British public opposed the invasion of Iraq (Dorman, 2011: 81), the UK supported its historical ally and acted in accordance with the idea that the UK 'punches at its weight' in international politics. Thus, in the case at hand, the French and UK strategic cultures contribute to our understanding of the diverging behavior of these states. UK strategic decision-makers felt participation in the US invasion of Iraq was appropriate, while their French colleagues felt it was not.

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The more recent conflict in Libya highlighted how strongly the strategic behavior of Europe's strongest economic power, Germany, diverges from France and the UK. While France and the UK took a leading role in an attempt to evidence their preeminence in the international realm, Germany did not participate in the NATO operation in Libya (Studeman, 2011: 45).

It can be argued that the Third Reich legacy left Germany with strong feelings of self-hatred (Mattox, 2011: 117). To ensure that Germany would never be involved in atrocities like those that occurred during WWII, strong liberal democratic values, a profound commitment to the rule of law, and an intense inclination to international law and international cooperation became deeply rooted in German strategic culture (Harnish & Wolf, 2010: 46). There is a strong commitment in Germany to the maxims 'never again war' and 'never again alone' (Harnish & Wolf, 2010: 46). As a result, Germany remains a civilian power. The Bundeswehr is not an expeditionary force and may never be used for the furtherance of German strategic interests abroad (Harnish & Wolf, 2010: 57). There is a strong belief that the goal of the use of force cannot be used to solve political problems (Noetzel & Schreer, 2008: 219). Moreover, there is a strong, cross-party agreement that the Bundeswehr may only participate in internationally authorized stabilization and reconstruction missions (Meiers, 2006: 160). Germany's preferred mode of cooperation is strongly multilateral; it cooperates on the basis of laws and rules and after explicit domestic and international authorization (Meiers, 2002: 213).

As a result, Germany finds itself in an awkward position. On the one side, the international community expects Germany to live up to its prominent European position and take responsibility when conflicts such as those that occurred in Libya arise. On the other side, there are very strong normative constraints on German decision-makers to remain reluctant to use robust means (Harnish & Wolf, 2010: 46). To be fair, changes have taken place in Germany: the Bundeswehr is now a voluntary force (Studemann, 2011: 45), and the number of German out-of-area deployments has steadily increased (Noetzel & Schreer, 2008: 212). However, change is slow. The importance of strategic culture for understanding strategic behavior is nicely illustrated when Mattox somewhat naively states that 'surprisingly, [...] there has been no major deviation from the cautious military forays into the international area made by Merkel's predecessors' (Mattox, 2011: 133). This is not surprising. An understanding of Germany's strategic culture gives us the insight that Germany cannot yield completely to international pressure, because its strategic decision-makers do not feel that would be appropriate.

Other Factors

After having focused so much on strategic culture in the above, one may be inclined to believe that European states primarily have diverging strategic behaviors because they are culturally distinctive. This cannot logically be argued; their circumstances play a role as well (Gray, 2007: 15). Strategic behavior certainly has a multitude of dimensions, including physical geography, domestic political dynamics, as well as material factors such as technology, the economy, and the military (Biava, Drent & Her, 2011: 1228). However, regarding strategic culture as shaping strategic decision-making determines the role it can be said to play vis-à-vis other factors. As has been argued, strategic culture cannot be distinguished from non-cultural factors. Factors such as physical geography or economy cannot be extra-contextual, and cannot have acultural causality (Poore, 2003: 282). After all, non-cultural factors cannot have meaning without the strategic culture that conditions them. Taking Germany as an illustration, this is simply to say that, for example, the fact that Bundeswehr is not an expeditionary force determines Germany's strategic behavior to a large extent. However, strategic culture provides the insight in why this is so. Germany chooses to play a small military role despite being the largest European economic power, precisely because strategic culture has constituted strategic decision-makers in such a way that it is felt this policy trajectory is most appropriate. Thus, although strategic culture cannot be separated *from* other variables, it is *in* all other variables.

Conclusion

The concept of strategic culture is very useful for explaining the diverging security policies and practices of European states. While strategic culture cannot be used to predict strategic behavior, it is imperative for understanding why strategic decision-making is shaped differently in European states. This is because strategic culture constitutes

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strategic decision-makers, and thus has the capability to influence how other factors are acted upon. It is important to consider a state's strategic culture, as it provides insights in (i) a state's unique standards of appropriateness regarding the use of force, and (ii) why strategic behavior is stable over time, despite political change or internal and external pressure. As has been shown by reference to the UK, France and Germany strategic culture is useful for understanding why different policy trajectories are taken. Strategic culture tell us an essential part of the story that would be lost if one would focus on such factors as physical geography, the military and the economy outside of the context of the culture they are embedded in.

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