

The Role of Social Institutions in Shaping Strategic Culture

Written by Anna Derinova

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ANNA DERINOVA, APR 29 2013

The legendary military theorist Carl von Clausewitz recognized war as “the test of moral and physical forces.” He believed that the main goal of any military strategy was to eliminate the enemy, its morale and spirit. The government, the army and the people were considered to constitute the unified whole of a state in any war.[1] It seems reasonable to claim that Clausewitz was the first to touch upon the role of morale and culture in shaping political and military strategy. Although decades have passed, we still find ourselves in the process of rediscovering numerous dimensions of military strategy and its relation to culture. Scholars have always been intrigued by the role of culture in decision-making and making war. However, little attention has been paid to the dynamic nature of strategic culture and, more importantly, the key factors leading to its modifications. Does strategic culture change? If yes, who or what is responsible? Finally, are there any particular transformation mechanisms we may observe? In order to approach these questions, I will first discuss key academic achievements in strategic culture studies, before examining some strong and weak points of each generation of scholars specializing in this field. Finally, I will present my own explanation of possible changes in strategic culture. In other words, I will attempt to demonstrate how a social institution may reshape or transform strategic culture through facilitating civil resistance.

In 1977, the concept “strategic culture” was introduced by Jack Snyder, who was trying to explain Soviet military policy in the sphere of nuclear weaponry. In his work “The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options”, he defines the term as “the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of a national strategic community share with regard to nuclear strategy.”[2] According to Snyder, power elites are capable of formulating a unique strategic culture through influencing public opinion and, thus, shaping the so-called “national strategic thinking.”[3] Other crucial elements of strategic culture include the context, which mainly consists of technological development and numerous threats facing the state; “strong cognitive content”[4], associated with traditions and beliefs, historical legacy and public perception of the role of institutions in the policy-making process. Not only did Snyder attempt to develop a new approach towards understanding interstate behavior in the sphere of global security and international politics, he also gave a fresh impetus to the investigation into the relations between military strategy and culture. As a result, a number of researchers, also known as the “first generation” (1980-s) scholars, brought the question of state/national culture back to the agenda and created a new wave of literature, which focused on the development of a new tool of analysis.

First-generation theorists of the 1980-s were mainly concerned with apparent differences in the Soviet and American nuclear strategies. Thus, two leading representatives of the first-generation school, Colin Gray and David Jones rely on three main factors defining and affecting strategic culture of both super-powers, i.e. historical background or legacy, political culture and geographical location. According to Gray, strategic culture may be defined as “modes of thought and action with respect to force, which derives from perception of the national historical experience, from aspirations for responsible behaviour in national terms”[5] or, in a more interpretative way, “socially transmitted ideas, attitudes and traditions, habits of mind and preferred methods of operation that are more or less specific to a particular geographically based security community that has a necessarily unique historical experience.”[6] Judging by this definition, Gray presents a contextual approach to strategic culture, which appreciates “both a shaping context for behaviour itself and as a constituent of that behavior.”[7] For Gray “strategic culture and patterns of strategic behavior...are mutually constitutive and related integrally.”[8] In his book “Nuclear strategy and National

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style”, the scholar characterizes the American approach to nuclear weapons by its “historically established modes of thoughts and actions with respect to force and, as a result, its unique set of national beliefs”[9] which appears to dominate the US domestic and foreign security discourse.

Almost simultaneously, Jones attempted to explain Soviet nuclear policy and distinguished three levels of strategic culture elements, partially based on Snyder’s classification. In his book “Soviet Strategic Culture”, one may observe a macro-environmental level, i.e. geographical, historical and ethno-cultural characteristics; a societal level, consisting of social, economic and political structures; and a micro level, including military institutions and their structures.[10] However, despite genuine innovations the first-generation school has brought to security and strategic studies, there are several key shortcomings that tend to seriously undermine the feasibility of the whole theory. Quite explicitly the drawbacks were presented and analyzed by A. Johnston in his article “Thinking about Strategic Culture”. First, the author persuasively argues that the major problem lies in the definition of the concept. The first-generation scholars tend to explain “strategic culture” in an “unwieldy”[11] fashion. Johnston is convinced that Jones and Gray present the strategic culture as an “amorphous” concept. Those factors and elements, proposed by both authors, appear to be too inclusive and hardly falsifiable: “each could stand by itself as a separate explanation of strategic choice.”[12] Second, the “first-generation” scholars imply that strategic thought quite naturally leads to only “one type of behavior”[13] – one strategic culture per state. As Johnston argues, the first-generation simplifies the complex nature of strategic culture by limiting it to only one possible dimension. Finally, the school bases its argument on the time invariance of strategic culture, thus, apparently neglecting the dynamic nature of strategic culture, its potential for development and adjustment to changing reality. Hence, the combination of “narrow and static determinism” and “amorphous definition”[14] of such a complicated phenomenon obviously results in the demand for a new understanding of strategic culture.

The “second generation” of scholars differs remarkably from the above-mentioned approach. Such authors as Bradley Klein, Robin Luckham,[15] Edwin Hollander[16] and Yosef Lapid,[17] mainly focus on the role of political hegemony and power elites, as “the keepers of strategic culture”. In particular, they characterize the concept as the means to establish “widely available orientations to violence and to ways in which the state can legitimately use violence against putative enemies.”[18] Klein, in his book “Strategic Studies and World Order: The Global Politics of Deterrence”, defines strategic culture as “the set of attitudes and beliefs held within a military establishment concerning the political objective of war and the most effective strategy and operational method of achieving it.”[19] Interestingly, the scholar argues that there is a clear difference between the so-called “declaratory”[20] strategy that legitimizes certain actions and the “actual operational” one which lies behind public speeches, declarations and pledges. Unlike the first-generation school, the scholars of the second-generation define strategic culture in terms of the interests and preferences of power elite and characterize it as a “tool”[21] that has no real impact on state and social behavior. However, Klein persuasively claims that despite its “instrumental” nature, strategic culture is partially shaped by the state’s historic legacy and experience.

Yet, the approach supported by the second generation of scholars appears to be far from fail-safe and faces its own problems. First, the theory seems to ignore the fact that political leaders should be affected by the strategic culture they tend to shape. According to Johnston’s critique “elites, too, are socialized in the strategic culture they produce, and thus can be constrained by the symbolic myths which their predecessors created.”[22] Thus, the dialectical relationship between elites and strategic culture should not be underestimated. Second, it is not clear whether we should expect cross-national differences in elite motives and thus behavior. The second-generation approach implies that political elites in all countries share realpolitik interests and preferences and face various external threats in a similar way. However, it seems hard to deny that strategic possibilities and actions depend on the range of strategic cultures and, thus, differ significantly. As a result of this ambiguity, the second-generation school has been criticized and followed by a third generation, which offers a highly promising approach towards understanding and interpreting strategic culture.

Scholars such as David Campbell,[23] Rebecca Bjork,[24] Jeffrey Legro[25] and others, preferred to interpret strategic culture as an intervening variable. The third generation school questions the plausibility of realpolitik arguments and tries to explain strategic behavior through military or political-military culture and organizational culture. Thus, according to Johnston’s positivist definition, strategic culture is an “ideational milieu which limits

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behavior choices.”[26] By the milieu the author understands “shared assumptions and decision rules that impose a degree of order on individual and group conceptions of their relationship to their social, organizational and or political environment.”[27] Likewise Kier suggests that “political-military culture is a product of changing domestic political contexts, hence varying as domestic politics varies.”[28] As we can observe, the scholars tend to exclude the concept of behavior from the strategic culture definition in order to avoid the tautological and deterministic trap of previous schools.

Furthermore, the third-generation school has developed a profound list of the so-called “keepers of strategic culture”, in other words, those “who maintain and effect the norms and values.”[29] The scholars mainly focus on political leaders, ruling elite and political institutions as the key actors capable of and responsible for manipulating and preserving strategic culture. According to Consuelo Cruz, leaders and power elite representatives should be considered as “strategic users of culture who redefine the limits of the possible in key foreign and security policy discourses.”[30] An even more crucial role is played by political institutions, including parties and domestic coalitions. For instance, one of the most outstanding representatives of the third generation, Jeffrey Legro, claims that the military has a dramatic effect on strategic culture mainly due to its inclination towards isolationism, and its “highly regimented and distinct nature.”[31] Almost the same argument is provided by Lantis in his comparative analysis of decision-making processes in Japan and Germany in the 1990-s. According to him “there are enduring institutional manifestations of strategic culture” in both major powers.

Finally, the third generation is quite remarkable for interpreting strategic culture as a dynamic phenomenon capable of changing over time. As the school acknowledges the vital role of “historical memory, political institutions and multilateral commitments”[32] in shaping strategic culture, it also claims that strategic culture may change significantly and undergo “enduring transformations”[33] According to Duffield and Lantis, there are several potential reasons for strategic culture modification. First, “dramatic events, such as revolutions, wars and economic catastrophes may discredit core beliefs and values.”[34] Second, strategic culture seems to be highly dependent on the exclusive power of political elites and the so-called “negotiated reality”[35] they create. In this respect, core decision-makers enjoy various possibilities for balancing widely-accepted values and norms with the unknown, recently introduced ones. Finally, dramatic changes in foreign policy caused by “security dilemma”[36] are likely to lead to some innovations in strategic and political-military strategy. This is the way Lantis characterizes the Japanese government’s behavior while facing the question of self-determination in East Timor.

Almost all second- and third-generation scholars of strategic culture, although involved in constant theoretical debates, seem to hold a firm position in defining the concept’s dynamic nature in particular. However, there is still a significant gap in understanding what causes major changes. According to Lantis and Berger,[37] strategic reality might be negotiated or revised after facing “external shocks”[38], such as revolutions and social resistance in general.[39] Yet, do uprisings and resistance movements happen accidentally? How do they manage to transform strategic culture all of a sudden? Unfortunately, numerous scholars seem to ignore the core mechanisms of changes. Thus, I will discuss the key role social institutions play in shaping and framing strategic culture through facilitating social resistance movements.

Social institutions undertake three steps in order to modify strategic culture. First, it provides the movement with the so-called mobilizing structure[40] here understood as a resource, which allows contentious acts to be sustained as social movements. The next step implies framing a sense of community and exclusive commitment[41] based on the unifying idea. This process includes fulfilling three core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, i.e. identification of a problem, and prognostic framing, which implies suggesting a new unifying idea and motivational framing when the facilitator motivates for action.[42] Finally, through facilitating social resistance and framing a sense of collective identity, the social institution is capable of reshaping strategic culture.

To begin with, the above-mentioned model implies that a social institution has a potential to become one of the leading “keepers of strategic culture”[43] if it manages to mobilize and facilitate effective social resistance, thus modifying strategic reality within a state. The term, “social institution” is somewhat unclear. However, contemporary sociology appears to be more consistent in its use of the term. A typical definition was suggested by Jonathan Turner: “a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing

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relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.”[44] Thus, from the definition we can see that the social institution is powerful enough to facilitate and mobilize social resistance, which implies “actions involving consciousness, collective action, and direct challenges to structures of power.”[45] Here, it is worth highlighting a conscious collective action that demonstrates rationality and solidarity of actors. This aspect is extremely important since in this paper resistance movements, as a crucial part of civil resistance, are mainly understood as reasonable and coherent actions rather than the products of public rage. In this respect, the act of resistance poses challenges to the ruling regime, established values and norms, thus is capable of compromising their legitimacy and stability. Social resistance is capable of undermining the fundamentals of strategic culture that very often underpin the power of ruling elites.

In order to foster civil resistance, based on new ideas and norms, the so-called “mobilizing structure,”[46] provided by the social institution, is needed. This term was first coined by Sidney Tarrow and a group of authors, John McCarthy, Charles Tilly and Doug McAdam when they first presented their innovative theory of “resource mobilization.”[47] As Tarrow, who coined this concept claims, it is reasonable to think of “mobilizing structures” as resources which allow contentious acts to be sustained as social movements, and which “bring people together in the field, shape coalitions, confront opponents, and assure their own future after the exhilaration of the peak of mobilization has passed.”[48] By resources the scholars understand: media, knowledge, money, labor, solidarity, legitimacy, and internal and external power elite support. McCarthy and Zald argue that social movements appear and develop successfully if individuals with grievances are capable of mobilizing sufficient resources to perform action. In other words, these structures institutionalize collective action.[49] Moreover, Tarrow finds that each movement tends to have its own organization, which can have profound effects on the success of the movement. As Tarrow persuasively argues, the most successful movements will have their own “connective tissue operating within and between formal movement organizations.”[50]

It may have seemed so far that by nourishing resistance social institutions only destroy but reluctantly create. However, the power of unifying ideas that social institutions bring, first, to facilitate resistance movements and, second, to reshape strategic culture, seems hard to deny. In order to support this hypothesis, frame theory, associated with “bringing ideas back in,”[51] needs to be applied. According to Pamela Oliver and Hank Johnston,[52] coherent systems of ideas rooted in politics, social justice or religion provide people with unique opportunities to develop their collective value commitments and normative implications, thus help to promote or resist social change. Moreover, unifying or mobilizing ideas can function as social frames or simply embrace them. Frame theory offers a relatively new conception of the transmission of social, political or religious ideas and the social construction processes of “thinking, reasoning, educating, and socializing.”[53] It is these new ideas that contribute to reframing and modifying strategic culture.

In this respect, Liberation Theology may present a fair example. In his book ‘A Theology of Liberation’[54] Gustavo Gutierrez mainly characterizes Liberation Theology as a theory based on the belief that Christianity involves not only faith in the teachings of the Church but also a commitment to change social and political conditions from within in societies in which it is considered exploitation and oppression exist. In 1980-1981 this theory played a decisive role in facilitating a non-violent resistance movement, which aimed to overthrow an oppressive regime in Brazil. Moreover, Liberation Theology significantly affected the strategic culture of present-day Brazil as a rapidly developing state. Thus, it seems plausible that the social institution mobilizes and facilitates resistance, thus reframes strategic culture via providing the key values and fundamental principles on which the whole ideological structure of the movement is usually based.

However, even the strongest resistance based on the most influential unifying idea alone would hardly manage to change the public perception of reality and reshape strategic culture as a whole, unless it manages to develop or reinforce collective identity. Within social movement theory, collective identity refers to the shared definition of a group that derives from its members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarities, answers the question of who we are and provides the movement with a particular niche within a field of political actors.[55] Collective identity is never fixed, but emerges and constantly develops through struggle as different socio-political actors interact with each other. The comprehensive nature of collective identity affects mobilization, trajectory, and even some strategies

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of social movements. Moreover, Owen Whooley[56] claims that it is collective identity that tends to serve as a key motivator for the formation and development of broad social communities, which are considered to be the key units of any social resistance movement.

To sum up, this paper has demonstrated how an influential social institution may reshape strategic culture as it frames a civil resistance movement, provides it with mobilizing structure and brings in the sense of exclusive commitment leading to the formation of community identity. By fostering social movements and spreading new ideas among the public, the social institution can modify strategic culture, provide new understanding of norms and values and, quite possibly, shape a new strategic culture based on the previous one. As Cruz once argued: "It is possible to recast reality itself by establishing a new credible balance between the known and the unknown....redefine the limits of the possible both descriptively and prescriptively."[57]

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