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Strategic Culture – Its History, Issues, and Complexity

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Executive Summary

The concept of strategic culture emerges in discussions of both tailored and integrated deterrence. This report examines the concept's history, current consensus, and enduring debates about what it entails. It also proposes a model of strategic culture as a complex system.

What is strategic culture? After a review of relevant literature, we propose the following definition:

An actor's[1] strategic culture is composed of beliefs, experiences, assumptions, attitudes, and patterned behaviors that shape perceptions and preferences about its security-related interests, objectives, and activities.

This definition reflects the consensus of most scholars. However, key issues remain concerning the relationship of strategic behavior to strategic culture, the social and political levels at which it operates, and how strategic culture can be modeled.

Strategic behavior and strategic culture. Many scholars assert a recursive relationship between strategic culture and strategic behavior. Culture can impact behaviors, and behaviors sometimes reinforce elements of culture. However, if the concept of strategic culture is to be useful for national security analysis, it must predict some amount of an organization's strategic behavior. Including all strategic behaviors (e.g., nuclear postures, military investments, deployments, military conduct in war, operations under the level of armed conflict) in the definition of strategic culture potentially creates a tautology that undermines prediction. To avoid this tautology, only traditional, repeated, and patterned behaviors are included in our definition of strategic culture, allowing other elements of strategic behavior to emerge independently.

Whether or not strategic culture influences strategic behavior remains an open question. Furthermore, there is consensus among scholars that factors, such as pragmatic material concerns, influence strategic behaviors and may override the effect of strategic culture all together. The influence of strategic culture on strategic behavior should be considered an empirical question to be tested in specific applications.

Whose strategic culture matters? Strategic cultures exist at the international, national, and subnational levels, like political parties, popular opinion, intelligentsia, and powerful stakeholders. Any analysis of an actor's strategic behavior must identify which stakeholders and their associated strategic cultures actually influence it.

Strategic culture as a complex system. Scholars have proposed that strategic culture is composed of identity, values, perceptions, and patterned behaviors. However, these elements are not independent; they can influence each other, creating a complex system of interrelationships. The complex system model we propose allows for the adaptation of the strategic culture concept to different nations and contexts.

[1] An actor is defined as the collective decision-making unit, which itself may be comprised of different stakeholders, each of whom has its own strategic culture and interests. The ultimate strategic decisions and actions taken by the actor are result from the outcome of these competing strategic agendas.

Background

The 21st century operational environment challenges Western 20th century strategic concepts. The 21st century began with a US focus on asymmetric threats from non-state actors who held incompatibly different views, values, and motivations from the West. Meanwhile, adversarial states retooled their strategic approaches to compete with, and potentially undermine, Western power and the rules-based order by competing below the level of open armed conflict. The need to understand the motives, interests, and potential actions of these culturally different state and non-state actors led to renewed interest in the role that an actor's culture plays in its strategic behavior, and by extension, efforts to deter it.

The concept that an actor's *strategic culture*[2] influences its strategic behavior is both intuitive and ancient. It implies that different actors approach competition and conflict with different cultural lenses, assumptions, and perhaps behaviors.[3] An early nod to strategic culture was proposed by the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu 2,500 years ago in his directive that "one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements" (Sun Tzu, 1963, p. 84). The ancient Greek historian Thucydides attributed the Athenians' power to their cultural and psychological attributes of innovation and restlessness (Thucydides, 1954, pp. 75-76). In *The Conquest of Gaul*, written around 50 BCE, Julius Caesar provided descriptions of Germanic culture and how he thought it inclined them for war. Centuries later, Clausewitz (1943, p. 125) stressed moral qualities, an element of culture, as a key dimension of war.

An overview of strategic culture-like concepts in historical perspective is presented in **Error! Reference source not found.**. Prior to World War II, anthropologists of the *culture and personality* school of thought proposed that the way a people are socialized in a particular culture leads to the development of modal personality types that, in turn, give each culture a distinct character (Benedict, 1959). The leaders of this school of thought, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, used this approach during WWII in *national character* studies intended to provide insight into US, Japanese, and Soviet ways of war (Al-Rodhan, 2015; Benedict, 1946; Hinton, 2020; Mead, 1942).

[2] The term *culture* has a tormented past, present, and probably future. Its roots are in the Latin *colere*, which means to cultivate. Just as a farmer cultivates a crop to grow in its environment and yield its fruits, culture is supposed to cultivate how its subjects view the world and behave in it. Strategy is derived from the Greek *strategos*, the art of generalship. Inherent in its meaning is the tradecraft of anticipating threats to interests and uncovering opportunities for their advancement, planning strategies for success, executing operations to accomplish these goals, and deploying tactics to accomplish those operations. Some degree of competition is implied in the notion of strategos and that one needs a plan to guard against another seeking advantage at its expense.

[3] *Strategic culture* differs from the political science concept of *political culture* in that it is focused on strategic issues of competition with other polities and not the general approach to political life within a polity. For instance, a common definition of political culture is "the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments, which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior in the political system" (Pye, 1968, p. 288).

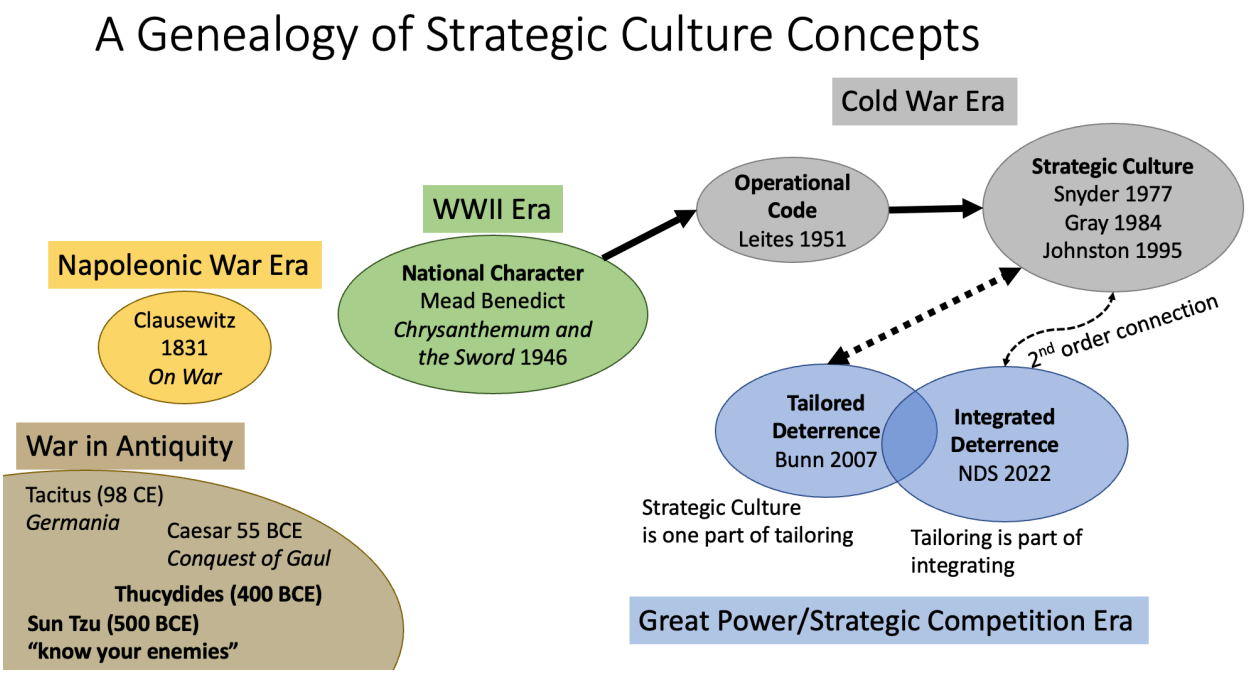

Figure 1. A history of strategic culture concepts

Thinking about the relationship of culture to strategy continued to be influenced by anthropologists after WWII. Nathan Leites (1951) credited Margaret Mead with influencing his notion of an *operational code*.[4] The next major work on culture and strategy was Jack Snyder's landmark 1977 study of Soviet strategic decision-making in which he coined the term *strategic culture*. He defined it as:

> *The sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to [nuclear] strategy (Snyder, 1977, p. 8).*

Snyder's work motivated academic scrutiny of the concept, resulting in several "generations" or schools of thought regarding what strategic culture is, whose strategic culture matters, and, most important, what (if any) effect strategic culture has on an actor's strategic behavior.[5] This report will address these fundamental questions and propose a model of strategic culture along with illustrations of Russian and Chinese strategic culture.

[4] Leites coined the term *operational code* and applied it to the Soviet leadership as a unit of analysis but did not provide a definition of it. Alexander George (1969) resurrected the concept and divided an actor's operational code into its philosophical content (e.g., What is the nature of political life?, Is the future hopeful?, Predictable? Controllable?), instrumental beliefs (e.g., How does one select goals? Courses of action? Assess risk? Timing?), and its stability through time.

[5] A few examples of strategic behavior include nuclear postures, military investments, deployments, military conduct in war, and operations under the level of armed conflict.

Strategic Culture—The Debates

Important epistemological, theoretical, and empirical issues about the definition and usefulness of "strategic culture" remain unresolved. Nevertheless, assertions about the importance of the concept have persisted. In 2005, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) funded a workshop that involved about two dozen strategic culture researchers in an effort to resolve debates in the field, develop a methodology for systematic application of strategic culture to national security issues, apply that methodology, and provide a curriculum for teaching comparative strategic culture (Larsen, 2006). The DTRA workshop participants came to agreement on a number of crucial issues (Johnson, 2006). They agreed that strategic culture changes, although more slowly than other political influences, and therefore has the potential for long-term influences on strategic behaviors that typically occur on shorter timescales. Furthermore, all agreed that a state's strategic culture is only one among many factors that influence its strategic behavior. Pragmatic concerns, such as military might and alliances, also influence strategic behavior and may very well supersede any influence strategic culture may have on specific actions. The participants also agreed that in any nation, multiple sub-national groups and organizations are stakeholders who can have differing strategic cultures and that any complete analysis of a nation's strategic behavior must consider what these are, their interactions, and their influences on strategic behavior. As to whether strategic culture causes behavior, the contributors differed. Some, such as Colin Gray (1999, 2006), maintained that the concept is primarily useful for providing a context for understanding behavior. Others, such as Christopher Twomey (2006), remained skeptical that strategic culture could explain behavior. ***However, all contributors agreed that strategic cultures exist, can be systematically identified, and are important when contemplating strategic behavior.***

The DTRA study produced a conceptual model of strategic culture based on four key variables: national identity, values, norms, and perceptive lens. Furthermore, the study authors proposed that these variables can be measured by dozens of inputs, such as sacred texts, historical political systems, interactions with other nations, demographics, and global norms. Their model is elaborated further below (see Strategic Culture as a Complex System: A Model**). They applied their model to analyze US, Russian, Chinese, Israeli, Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Syrian, and al Qaeda strategic cultures in an effort to demonstrate its usefulness (Larsen, 2006).**

Interest in strategic culture has continued (Adamsky, 2020; Antczak, 2018; Gotz & Staun, 2022; Hassner, 2014, 2016; Herd, 2022; Hinton, 2020; Johnson, 2021; Libel, 2020; Pillsbury, 2015; Rumer & Sokolsky, 2020; Scobell, 2014; Simalcik, 2020; Sinovets, 2016; Tellis, 2016; Zarobny & Salek-Iminska, 2021). Bloomfield (2012, p. 456) attempted to unite competing views of strategic culture and concluded that "from Gray we take the notion that culture provides context; that it guides and shapes interpretation: we just have to accept that culture is a disaggregated thing with contradictory elements rather than a monolithic whole. From Johnston, we take the goal of building *falsifiable* theory." However, not all scholars find value in the concept; Echevarria (2013) **concluded that** ***strategic culture is a concept with "more problems than prospects" that should be abandoned.***

Strategic Culture in US Deterrence Concepts

Finally, it should be noted that the concept of strategic culture is both implicit and featured in important US national security documents. The concept of tailored deterrence introduced in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) directed that US deterrence strategies and operations should be tailored to different types of adversaries, such as nuclear states, non-nuclear state adversaries, and non-state terrorist organizations, and should include the different kinds of forces and military capabilities emergent

in the 21st century (U.S. Department of Defense, 2006). The 2006 QDR also stressed the need for understanding the cultures of adversaries and populations among whom warfighters operated. Elaine Bunn (2007, p. 3) pointed out that by invoking the need to tailor deterrence to other types of actors, tailored deterrence implied a need for understanding the strategic cultures of adversaries, and to be feasible, it must address questions, such as, "What are the nation's or group's values and priorities? How are these affected by its history and strategic culture?" She also emphasized the need for communications to adversaries to be tailored to adversaries' perceptions, which are shaped by "an adversary's national and cultural attributes as well as its unique history of dealing with and studying the United States (Bunn, 2007, p. 7)."[6] The 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) introduced the concept of integrated deterrence (White House, 2022, p. 22). The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) considers integrated deterrence to be its "centerpiece," while noting that it should be "tailored to specific competitors and challenges" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p. iv). The inclusion of tailored deterrence and its implicit mandate to consider culture logically connects strategic culture to the new integrated deterrence concept.

Strategic Culture—What Is It?

What are the main components of "strategic culture"? We reviewed 22 published definitions and identified specific elements encompassing ideological, affective (i.e., emotional), cognitive, experiential, and behavioral factors (Table 1).

Table 1. Named elements of strategic culture—literature review

Strategic Culture Element Category	Named Strategic Culture Elements	Select References
Ideational	Ideas, Beliefs, Values, Thoughts, Symbols, Ideology, Identity, Narratives	(Booth, 1979; Gray, 1981; Johnson, 2006; Johnston, 1995b; Longhurst, 2004; Rosen, 1995; Snyder, 1977; Tellis, 2016; Zarobny & Salek-Iminska, 2021)
Affect	Emotions, Attitudes	(Booth, 1979; Klein, 1988; Snyder, 1977)
Cognitive	Perceptions, Seeing, Frames, Preferences, Interests	(Duffield, 1999; Gray, 1981; Johnson, 2006; Johnston, 1995b)
Experiential	Experience, History, Geography	(Gray, 2006; Rumer & Sokolsky, 2020; Zarobny & Salek-Iminska, 2021)
Behavioral	Behavior, Practices, Actions, Traditions, Normative Behaviors	(Booth, 1979; Johnson, 2006; Rumer & Sokolsky, 2020; Snyder, 1977; Tellis, 2016)

We propose the following based on our review of the 22 definitions in Table 1:

> *An actor's strategic culture is composed of beliefs, experiences, assumptions, attitudes, and patterned behaviors that shape perceptions and preferences about its security-related interests, objectives, and activities.*

This definition collates the many definitions offered by strategic culture scholars. We do not think any of the elements included in this definition contradict one another. We have specified that the behaviors we have in mind are *patterned*, by which we mean repeated traditional behaviors that reinforce ideological components of strategic culture; we do not mean *all* strategic behaviors, avoiding circular argumentation. For example, a tradition of using mass formation and attritional warfare might be taught in military

[6] Schneider and Ellis (2011) further elaborated on the need to tailor deterrence to the strategic culture of adversaries.

academies, reinforcing this type of warfare as part of a nation's strategic culture such that it habitually results in the use of large military formations in times of war. We elaborate on this concept in the section entitled *Strategic Culture as a Complex System*. The definition we offer is intentionally ambiguous about what an actor is. In part, this is because 21st century adversaries can be state or non-state actors. Additionally, an actor's strategic behavior is often the product of competing stakeholders within the actor's organization, which is the topic explored in the next section.

At What Level Does Strategic Culture Operate?

As we have seen, another question that strategic culture scholars debate concerns the appropriate unit of analysis. Whose strategic culture matters? Some scholars focus on the decision-making elite of a nation (Gray, 1981; Johnston, 1995a; Klein, 1988; Rumer & Sokolsky, 2020; Scobell, 2014; Snyder, 1977; Tannenwald, 1999). "Third generation scholars" emphasize that the decision-making apparatus of a country involves different stakeholders and organizations and that it is necessary to consider their different strategic cultures and how they interact to produce strategic behavior outcomes (Berger, 1998; Kier, 1995; Lock, 2010). Christopher Twomey (2008) summarized how different social scales and different national security issues intersect. He notes that scholars interested in tactical and operational behaviors (e.g., what forces to develop, what weapons to use) tend to focus on competing organizational cultures within a nation-state. He finds that this body of literature is more logically consistent and empirically sound than that of the scholars who focus on national-level strategic culture and grand strategy. As described above, the 2005 DTRA project and subsequent scholars appear to be largely in agreement that state actors consist of a variety of national security stakeholder organizations with different interests and strategic cultures and that it is necessary to account for how their interactions lead to actual strategic behaviors.

The operations of sub-national organizations can be influenced by that national strategic culture, as well as the cultures of the organizations themselves. Along with practical, material concerns, either or both levels of strategic culture can influence strategic behavior (Johnson, 2021). Strategic behavior is therefore potentially influenced by a triad of these considerations, although not necessarily equally (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Scholars debate which of these three potential influences has the most influence on a nation's strategic behavior. We propose that the relative influence of each element of the triad is an empirical question that is sensitive to a particular national or international context. Knowing what strategic culture is and whose culture matters are necessary prerequisites to analyzing strategic culture, but the question of what influence it has on strategic behavior is the key theoretical question explored in the next section.

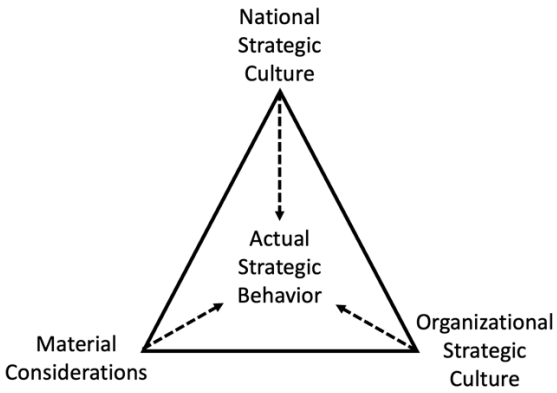

Figure 2. The competing influences of national strategic culture, organizational strategic culture, and material considerations on strategic behavior

Strategic Culture—What Does It Do?

The fundamental debate concerning strategic culture is whether it matters at all. What, if anything, does strategic culture do? And does it impact strategic behavior in any meaningful way? Interestingly, there appears to be a divide on this issue among scholars who study China versus those who study Russia. According to Johnston's (1995a) analysis of ancient Chinese Confucian strategic culture, ancient Chinese national strategic culture is symbolic and does not do much at all in terms of influencing the state's strategic behavior. Similarly, Twomey (2006) found little if any alignment between Chinese strategic culture concepts and Chinese strategic behavior. By contrast, analysts of Russian strategic culture repeatedly highlight its importance, drawing extensive connections between critical components, such as history, geography, Russian Orthodoxy, and centralized decision-making to Moscow's strategic policy from imperial Russia to the present (Eitelhuber, 2009; Ermarth, 2006; Herd, 2022; Rumer & Sokolsky, 2020; Snyder, 1977).

A review of 12 key works that specified the function of strategic culture indicates that strategic culture functions to:

- *Influence thinking and decision-making*. In fact, this is the most common function attributed to strategic culture (Gray, 1981, 1999, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Legro, 1996; Snyder, 1977). For instance, Snyder (1977, p. 9) proposed that it "guides and circumscribes thought on strategic questions," and Legro (1996, p. 121) says that it "shapes organizational cognition."
- *Frame issues.* Strategic culture scholars also posit how strategic culture influences the framing of issues and events—how they are perceived and how actions are justified (Bloomfield, 2012; Gray, 2006; Kier, 1995; Legro, 1996; Snyder, 1977).
- *Justify actions taken*. According to "second generation" scholars, strategic culture is a narrative construct used to convince publics and allies to agree with the machinations of a dominant political elite (Klein, 1988; Legro, 1996). Similarly, Johnston (1995b) argues that even though strategic culture is not the primary influence on strategic behavior, it nonetheless is used to justify and rationalize strategic behavior to public audiences. For instance, Tannenwald (1999) points out that strategic culture can serve to justify certain actions as acceptable and distinguish these from actions seen as deviant or taboo, such as the use of nuclear weapons.
- *Provide meaning and context*. The final function attributed to strategic culture is that it provides contextual understanding for why things happen. The primary proponent of this view is Gray (1999), who argues for "strategic culture as context." Gray's approach is explicitly interpretive; he sees strategic culture as a device through which actors interpret the events of history, the implications of geography, and the meanings they assign to strategic issues (Gray, 2006). Gray also sees strategic culture as a device that analysts can use to interpret why decisions were made (Gray, 1981). Strategic culture scholars from different schools similarly see the value of the concept for providing meaningful context. Lock (2010, p. 687) argues that "strategic culture serves to constitute certain strategic behaviour [sic] as meaning."

In summary, most scholars argue that strategic culture has some influence on thinking, decision-making, and perception, as well as a role in justifying actions taken. It also provides actors with meaningful interpretations and analysts with a means of gaining a deeper understanding of another actor's strategic behavior.

Strategic Culture as a Complex System

Snyder (2002), after reviewing anthropological theories of war, first suggested that strategic culture was best framed as an open complex system in which behavior, symbols, and ideas are connected through feedback loops, although he did not develop such a model. ***We propose that modeling strategic culture as a complex system can incorporate the current consensus and at least partially resolve the debate over strategic behavior***.

Complex Systems

A complex system has elements that interact through direct and indirect feedback (Holland, 1998; Kauffman & Roli, 2021; Kuznar, 2022; Kuznar & Pollard, 2022; Turner & Baker, 2019). A single element, or node, may have direct links from or to other nodes. The interactions between nodes form a web of causal links, which may have linear or non-linear influences on one another. Complex system models allow the tracking of how influence pulses through a system. Complex systems can exhibit unpredictable, emergent behaviors that involve the evolution of new structures and relationships, especially when non-linear connections exist. Complex system models have been useful in modeling phenomena in the physical, biological, and social worlds (Cioffi-Revilla, 2014) and are particularly useful for anticipating possible futures and for exploring the implications of changes in key nodes or connections (Meadows, 2008).

Complex system models can be purely conceptual, analyzed as networks, or instantiated as dynamic computational models. Conceptual system models represent the theoretical connections between nodes and are useful for exploring the logical implications of how they influence one another (Lane & Husemann, 2008). Once a conceptual model is constructed, an analysis of its network can shed light on leverage points, or nodes, that have more potential to impact the system (Kuznar & Pollard, 2022). We present a conceptual model of strategic culture as a complex system.[7] This could serve as the core of a network or dynamic computational model.[8]

Strategic Culture as a Complex System: A Model

We take the DTRA strategic culture model as our starting point in developing a model of strategic culture as a complex system—what we will abbreviate as the Strategic Culture System Model (SCSM)—because it was explicitly developed by experts to address national security concerns. The DTRA model's four basic

[7] Culture concepts lend themselves to complex analysis. An anthropological definition of culture from the 19th century, still often cited, is "that *complex whole* which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society [emphasis added]" (Tylor, 1958, p. 1). Another foundational definition of culture, and one cited by most strategic culture theorists, comes from anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 89), who argued that culture is "a *system* of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about, and attitudes toward life [emphasis added]." For anthropologists, whether culture includes behavior, as in Tylor's definition, or is a system of symbolic meanings, as in Geertz's, it has always been seen as a complex system. By extension, since strategic culture definitions have been derived from anthropological ones, strategic culture should also be conceived as a complex system.

[8] Computational system models allow quantitative analysis of the influence that nodes can have on one another and on the system overall. System dynamic models provide a sense of how influence may actually flow through a system (Forrester, 1968, 1991; Meadows, 2008; Meadows et al., 1972). Agent-based models depict a complex system as the interaction of many units with their own decision rules and are best for exploring possible emergent phenomena (Epstein & Axtell, 1996; Kahovec, 2018; Pike et al., 2022).

variables—identity, values, norms, and perceptive lens—function as nodes in a complex system. However, their model did not specify how these elements related to one another or their relative influences on strategic behavior. In this section, we present a model that specifies how their four variables may integrate into a cohesive model of strategic culture.

Viewed as a system of influences, strategic behavior is an important aspect of a strategic culture system. This is because some behaviors—especially if they are repeated in a routine, patterned way—can reinforce the ideational and emotional aspects of strategic culture. For example, standing at attention and listening to patriotic music when a flag is raised or lowered is a behavior that reinforces a patriot's national identity and the symbolic meanings attached to the flag. There is feedback from the repeated routine and the system of symbolic meanings. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, p. 86) incorporated some but not all behavior in his definition of *habitus*, which is "a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class," and elaborated on how behavior often reinforces cultural meaning in his works (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1998). Snyder's original definition of strategic culture specifically singled out "patterns of habitual behavior." In complex system terminology, Snyder's and Bourdieu's definitions propose a feedback loop between habitual behaviors and meaning. Furthermore, recall that the DTRA model defined norms as "accepted and expected modes of behavior." ***As the flag example illustrates, norms reinforce identity and values. In addition, norms influence perceptions. Positive feedbacks in this system represent circular logics that reinforce identities, values, perceptions, and normative behaviors.*** Traditional, patterned, normative behaviors are those that are customary for an actor. Examples that scholars have proposed include US reliance on technology in warfare (Gray, 1981; Luckham, 1984; Mahnken, 2006), Russian use of mass wave formations (Antczak, 2018), and Chinese use of active defense (Scobell, 2014; Thomas, 2014a; Zhang, 2002).

The core of the SCSM is comprised of the four DTRA strategic culture variables (Johnson, 2006, p. 15):

- **Identity:** "A nation-state's view of itself, comprising the traits of its national character, its intended regional and global roles, and its perceptions of its eventual destiny"
- **Values:** "The material and/or ideational factors which are given priority and selected over others"
- **Norms:** "Accepted and expected modes of behavior"
- **Perceptive lens:** "Beliefs (true or misinformed) and experiences, or the lack of experience, which color the way the world is viewed."

As shown in Table 2, we made nominal amendments to DTRA study's definitions. Rationales for these changes are in the right-hand column.

Table 2. Strategic culture variables

Strategic Culture Variable	DTRA Definition	Our Definition	Rationale
Identity	A nation-state's view of itself, comprising the traits of its national character, its intended regional and global roles, and its perceptions of its eventual destiny	An actor's (nation or other organization) view of itself, comprising the traits of its character, its intended roles, and its perception of its destiny	In light of general agreement that the interests and strategic cultures of sub-national organizations are at least as important in generating strategic behavior, we generalize the DTRA definition to make this explicit. Likewise, we generalize regional and global roles to simply the roles the organization sees itself playing on any stage—national, regional, or global.
Values	In a cost/benefit analysis, the material and/or ideational factors which are given priority and selected over others	Material and/or ideational factors which are given priority and selected over others	If self-identity defines who an organization believes it is, then values define what the organization views as desirable, preferable, or morally good. We agree with DTRA that values can be material or ideological. We also think that values can be general, as in valuing freedom, or very specific.
Perception	Beliefs (true or misinformed) and experiences, or the lack of experience, which color the way the world is viewed	The interpretation of information (true or misinformed) and historical and geographic experience which color the way the world is viewed	Beliefs may color perceptions, and they are therefore not the same thing. Perception is more properly how actors interpret information as they encounter it. Furthermore, an actor's history and geography often influence its perceptions.
Norms	Accepted and expected modes of behavior	Customary, traditional, accepted, and expected modes of behavior	While the DTRA definition of norms as acceptable and expectable behavior captures the routine, repeatable, culturally patterned character of norms, we add the words "customary" and "traditional" to reinforce this fact.

The Strategic Culture System Model (SCSM)

The DTRA research, as well as much of the academic literature reviewed above, implies that each of the four strategic culture variables can influence the others, creating a complex system of six mutually and positively reinforcing relationships (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Reinforcing relationships are especially significant in complex systems because their reinforcement can entrench one another, forming a configuration that is impervious to change. Conversely, if reinforcing relationships break, time-honored configurations of strategic culture can unravel. This model does not preclude the influence of exogenous factors, such as geopolitical power differentials and differences in military might. The purpose of the model is to provide a means of assessing how its elements make up strategic culture by influencing one another.

We propose that, in a particular case, not all these connections will be equally influential. A connection's relevance will depend on a specific organization's broader sociopolitical, cultural, geographic, historical, and geopolitical context.[9] This is important because when certain connections are weak or non-existent, it is a relatively easier task to trace the causal effect of the remaining variables and identify the nodes that have the most influence in a particular strategic culture in that context. For instance, if in a given context, there is a strong link between values and perception but comparatively weak links between these variables and norms, then normative behavior is less central to that strategic culture, and analysis of the potential impact of strategic culture should focus on the reinforcing relationship between values and perceptions. As an example, placing a positive value on democracy directly leads Western liberal democracies to perceive authoritarianism as a threat (White House, 2022) without necessarily affecting how they go to war. If, hypothetically, American decision-makers did not include encouraging democratic values abroad, then authoritarianism would not be perceived as an existential national security threat.

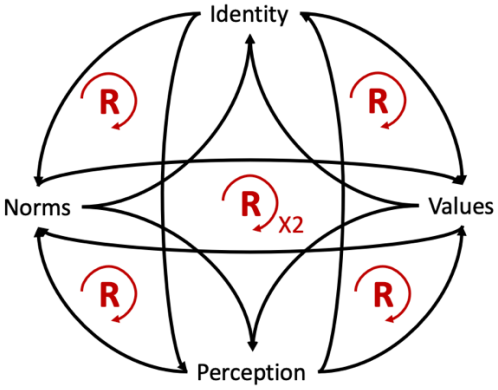

Figure 3. SCSM: A complex system model of strategic culture, where R's indicate reinforcing relationships

In other cases, strategic norms may skew perceptions which, in turn, reinforce norms, as shown in the China example below. In addition, norms and values may reinforce one another. For example, strategic culture analysts have noted that the US has historically had an aversion to troop casualties (i.e., placed a high value on preserving the lives of its troops). This has led to a norm of emphasizing force protection in its military behavior (Gray, 1981; Mahnken, 2006). Norms may also influence identity and values. Some scholars have argued that reliance on industrial, high-tech warfare has become a US strategic culture norm (Gray, 1981; Luckham, 1984). Indeed, US history includes examples of the military-industrial complex searching for technological solutions to US threats and celebrating the workers who do so (for example, Rosie the Riveter to J. Robert Oppenheimer). Likewise, norms can directly reinforce values. Scholars have argued that building walls reinforced ancient Chinese defensive values drawn from Confucian ethics (Johnston, 1995a; Scobell, 2014; Twomey, 2006).

We propose this dynamic system of feedbacks and indirect influences as a model for operationalizing many of the concepts discussed in the strategic culture literature. In the end, the actual strategic behavior a nation manifests will be the result of the interactions of national strategic culture, sub-national organizational cultures, and pragmatic material considerations (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

[9] Recall that strategic culture is a cultural system concerned with security and not the broad culture in which it is situated.

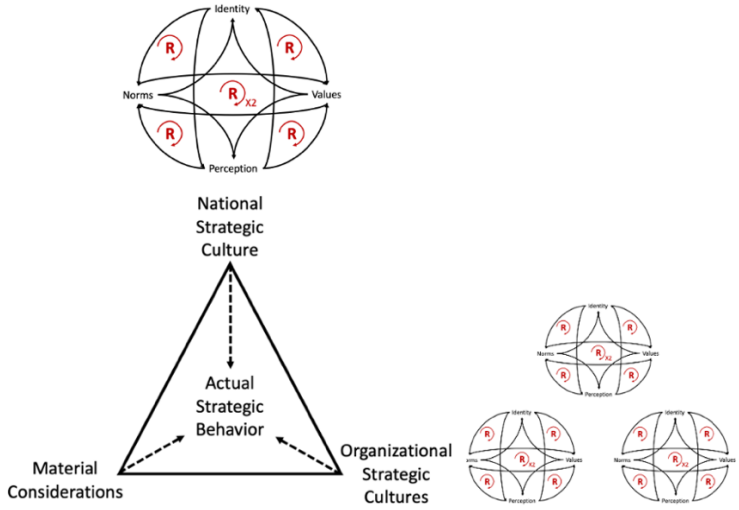

Figure 4. The interaction of systems of national strategic culture, organizational cultures, and material considerations in the generation of strategic behavior

We offer two vignettes to illustrate more fully how a complex system model of strategic culture may work. These are intended only to illustrate how strategic culture variables and their relationships to one another may be manifested and how key relationships may be identified. They are not full expositions of Russian or Chinese strategic culture. Other scholars have produced detailed analyses of Russian (Eitelhuber, 2009; Ermarth, 2006; Herd, 2022; Rumer & Sokolsky, 2020) and Chinese (Mahnken, 2011; Pillsbury, 2015; Thomas, 2014a; Twomey, 2006; Zhang, 2002) strategic cultures.

Vignette 1: Russian Strategic Culture

Applying the SCSM to the Russian attack on Ukraine illustrates how Russian strategic culture may be manifested in relationships between identity, values, and perception.

Core aspects of Russian national **identity** appear to drive the **values** Putin expresses in his political discourse. The centrality of Russian Orthodox identity reinforces Russian nationalism (i.e., its sense of itself), as well as a highly militaristic culture, which is supported by the Church (Adamsky, 2019; Eitelhuber, 2009; Herd, 2022; Sinovets, 2016; Zarobny & Salek-Iminska, 2021). The relationship between identity and religious values can be seen when prominent Russian Orthodox voices, including Patriarch Kirill, bless Russian military action driving the war in Ukraine (Fagan, 2022) and Russian nuclear silos and submarines incorporate Russian Orthodox priests and chapels (Adamsky, 2019).[10]

Values, in turn, drive core aspects of Russian **identity**. Putin (2022) emphasizes nationalism and militarism as important to the defense of the historical concept of a greater Russia. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, conservative values also reinforced Russian Orthodox identity on a global scale, as an increasing number of far-right thinkers espousing traditional, nativist values joined the Russian Orthodox Church (Yousef, 2022).

[10] As Adamsky details, Russian missile silos and submarines have assigned Russian Orthodox priests—not to serve as chaplains, as in the US military, to serve the general spiritual needs of the troops, but rather to specifically provide a Russian Orthodox, religious justification for their military purpose.

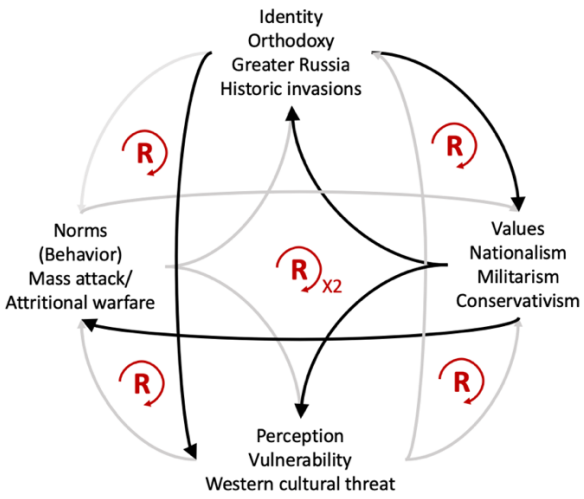

Figure 5. Russian strategic culture as a complex system. Bold lines illustrate relationships described in vignette 1 and does not imply that other connections are not also relevant. R's indicate reinforcing relationships

Russian **identity** can also impact how Russian decision-makers or populations **perceive** their environment. The country's vulnerable geography and history of repeated invasions—from the Mongols, to Napoleon, to Hitler—have deepened its threat perception towards Ukraine, NATO, and Western countries and institutions (Dutt, 2023; Eitelhuber, 2009; Gotz & Staun, 2022; Herd, 2022; Sinovets, 2016). Russia's heavily Orthodox **identity** has also been used to influence popular **perception** of the Ukraine war as key Orthodox Church leaders cast Russia's invasion as a battle against perceived neofascism and immorality from the West (Fagan, 2022; Herd, 2022).

Likewise, Russian **values** may influence the country's **perceptions**. Putin emphasizes the importance of conservative Russian values, notably in areas such as gender and sexuality, and casts Ukraine's push for closer ties with NATO and the EU as a moral and existential threat to Russia (Faiola, 2022; Herd, 2022; Putin, 2022). **Values** can also influence **norms**. The Russian military has historically favored the use of massed formations and exhibited an indifference to casualties, even among their own troops or civilians (Antczak, 2018; Eitelhuber, 2009; Ermarth, 2006; German, 2020), as was exhibited in the indiscriminate bombing of Syrian cities (Adamsky, 2020) and most recently in the Ukraine war, which has been replete with indiscriminate bombing and the use of mass wave attacks in places like Bakhmut.

In short, the complex workings of Russian strategic culture in the war in Ukraine highlight the influence of identity and values on Russian threat perceptions and demonstrate how complex system models can connect strategic culture theory with practice.

Vignette 2: Chinese Strategic Culture

Elements of Chinese strategic culture discussed in this vignette are illustrated in **Error! Reference source not found.**. Some strategic culture scholars argue that the perception of foreign threat runs deep in Chinese history (Johnston, 1995a; Twomey, 2006), and indeed current Chinese military doctrine expresses the belief in a constant threat from the West, causing any Western actions to be **perceived** as threatening (Halper, 2013; Pillsbury, 2015; Scobell, 2014; Simalcik, 2020). A Chinese strategic culture **norm** is maintaining an "active defense," which is offensive action designed for defensive purposes (Scobell, 2014; Thomas, 2014b; Zhang, 2002). Island building in the South China Sea has been cited as an example of Chinese active defense (Simalcik, 2020). It is important to note that the **perception** that China is under threat justifies the investments in island building and therefore reinforces the **norm** of active defense.

Perception can reinforce **identity**. A cornerstone of Chinese **identity** is China as the "Middle Kingdom," the power, economic, and cultural center of the world (Mahnken, 2011). By extension, many argue that China's neighbors are perceived as inferior tributary polities (Mahnken, 2011; Pillsbury, 2015; Twomey, 2006; Zhang, 2002). In this way, China's **perception** that its neighbors are its inferiors reinforces its **identity** as the Middle Kingdom.

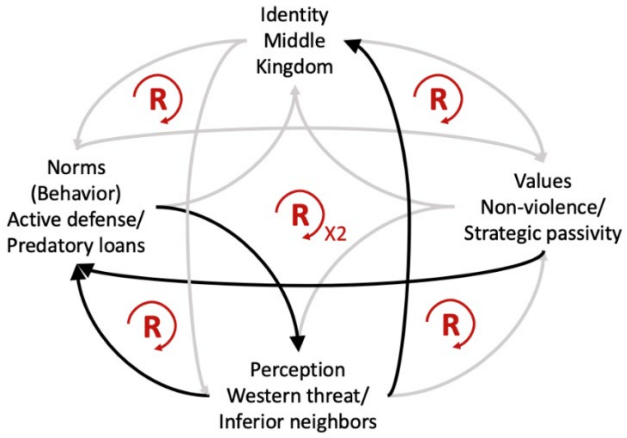

Figure 6. Chinese strategic culture as a complex system. Bold lines illustrate relationships described in vignette 2 and does not imply that other connections are not relevant. R's indicate reinforcing relationships

This dynamic may, in part, be manifested in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, in which effectively predatory loans to Central Asian and African countries have been used to gain influence (Farwa, 2018).

Furthermore, employment of Chinese irregular and non-military sources of influence and power make up the vast majority of its global activities. Some scholars of Chinese strategic culture argue that this is an extension of Confucian **values** that honor non-violence as a means of exercising power or exhibit "the art of winning without fighting" borrowed from the ancient writings of Sun Tzu (Scobell, 2014; Zhang, 2002). Other scholars attribute Chinese non-violent uses of power to the pragmatic principle of *shi,* right action exercised in right context for strategic advantage (Mahnken, 2011; Pillsbury, 2015; Thomas, 2014b), which leads Chinese strategists to avoid violence when they are in a militarily weak posture but aggressively use violence when they have the military advantage. These exemplars demonstrate a few ways that elements of Chinese strategic culture may interact within a complex system of reinforcing direct and indirect effects.

Conclusion

This review of strategic culture aimed to provide an overview of the concept, its significance to deterrence, and a model that could be operationalized to inform questions of strategic culture. Each of these objectives is summarized below, in addition to cautions about the limits of what strategic culture can say about strategic behaviors.

Strategic culture is an ancient concept, but its modern form developed in the 20th century context of WWII and the Cold War. The concept has been much debated, and although a general consensus exists about its characteristics, unresolved issues limit it as a robust analytic concept. One issue is the relationship between strategic behavior and strategic culture. If the aim of using the strategic culture concept is to understand the causes of and predict strategic behavior, then including those same behaviors in its definition, as some scholars have, is a tautology that undermines causal inference or prediction. However, we argue that inclusion of some forms of national security behavior in the definition, provided they are repeated, traditional, patterned behaviors, does not undermine a causal understanding of all strategic behavior; traditions can reinforce perceptions and ideational aspects of strategic culture.

Furthermore, the evidence that a state's strategic culture has a causal impact on its strategic behavior is not conclusive. Some authors propose that because strategic cultures differ and states behave in different ways in seemingly similar circumstances, strategic culture must therefore have a causal effect on strategic behavior. Others have concluded that there is just not enough evidence to support the case. Resolving the causal effect of complex social phenomena is tremendously difficult and is exacerbated by competing social theories and the multitude of factors that can impact a state's security behavior. Consequently, the question of strategic culture's causal effect remains unresolved. We take the issue of the causal effect of

strategic culture to be an empirical question that must be carefully tested in the particular context in which it is applied.

The areas in which there is consensus may aid application of strategic culture in context. A DTRA study has identified four variables that comprise strategic culture, and social science methods that can be used to operationalize these and measure their effects. Identity, values, and perceptions can be accessed through systematic analysis of documents, discourse, and symbolism (Johnson, 2006). Behavioral norms can be identified through historical analyses. Each of these will be specific to a particular country's cultural, historic, and geographic context.

Another area of consensus is that the strategic cultures of all organizations within a country that can influence strategic behavior must be accounted. Accounting for the competition between these competing strategic cultures further adapts strategic culture to a specific context. We have proposed a complex system model of strategic culture as a guide for adapting strategic culture to a particular context. Not every possible linkage in the model will be relevant in every context, allowing the model to be adapted to different contexts based on the strengths of the relationships between its variables and consideration of factors outside of strategic culture. In this way, we hope to provide a viable model of strategic culture that can explain and anticipate strategic behavior when appropriate but that allows other factors to be accounted as well.

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