# CULTURE
## SHAPES SECURITY

A broad knowledge of the values and traditions
of other societies can help promote peace

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Culture within the context of security studies has been discussed and debated since classical antiquity (Baylis, Wirtz, & Gray, 2010, p. 86), but often the influence of culture in matters of security has been underappreciated. The culture of a nation shapes its strategy. Just as culture orients and influences individual citizens, in the same manner culture orients the views of a nation, influences judgments and prescribes the actions to pursue. Security professionals, be they members of the local police force, the military, the intelligence community or in ministries of government such as interior or defense, can benefit from utilizing cultural knowledge and incorporating a cultural approach towards a range of security challenges faced today. Those challenges include the Arab Spring, global environmental degradation, Iraq and Afghanistan, and activities of violent extremist organizations.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Culture has various meanings and manifestations. Culture is complex and dynamic, is cognitive and tangible, has power to influence, and can be produced and consumed. A definition of culture used widely by academia was provided by the late anthropologist Clifford Geertz. According to Geertz, culture is "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude towards life" (Baylis, Wirtz, & Gray, 2010, p. 86). Described in this way, culture grows and spreads over time, has specific contents associated with it, and leads to emotional and cognitive actions among its followers.

A view of the Qal'a-e Ikhtiyar al-Din palace in Herat, Afghanistan. Germany and the United States donated $2.4 million to reconstruct this symbol of Afghan culture that dates back to 330 B.C. and Alexander the Great.

Afghan women leave the Kart-e-Sakhi shrine in Kabul. Culture can be expressed through religion, dress, music, sports or other customs.

In the world today, cultural knowledge should mean knowledge related to all aspects of culture, not confined only to "the arts." Cultural knowledge is not only cultural competence, or an understanding of customs and practices at selected social settings, but a broader understanding of the various meanings and manifestations of culture. Cultural knowledge is very important because culture orients human beings, gives them identities and influences their interactions. Responsible use of cultural knowledge can provide advantages to decision makers managing the multidimensional security challenges of the modern world.

## SECURITY IN THE WORLD TODAY

Like culture, security is also both physical and metaphysical, and has a broad meaning. Professor Paul Williams argues that "security is most commonly associated with the alleviation of threats to cherished values; especially those which, if left unchecked, threaten the survival of a particular referent object in the near future" (Williams P. D., 2008, p. 5). In today's world, security comprises a broad range of issues that includes the classical international struggle for power and matters of war and peace, but also the modern concepts of human security. While describing modern day security issues, professor Barry Buzan notes that "in today's world the national security problem needs to be seen in terms of a general systemic security problem in which individuals, states, and the system all play a part, and in which economic, societal, and environmental factors can be as important as political and military ones" (Sheehan, 2005, pp. 46-47). Security is also a state of mind, a belief, an assurance of

the preservation of the self. It is a social idea. As professor Michael Sheehan points out: " 'Security' is a socially constructed concept. It has a specific meaning only within a particular social context" (Sheehan, 2005, p. 43).

## LINKING CULTURE AND SECURITY

The link between culture and security is a matter of debate. It is not always obvious that there is a link between them. Some may even say that other than security personnel ensuring safety at certain cultural events, there is no link. Professor Andrew Latham has a good observation: "The relationship between culture, identity and international security policy is far from obvious, and debate and terminological confusion are pervasive in both the theoretical and descriptive literatures" (Latham, 1999, p. 131). He's joined by professor Michael Williams, who notes that "the apparent absence of a concern with culture and identity in traditional conceptions of security needs to be understood as the historical legacy of a conscious attempt to exclude identity concerns from the political realm" (Williams M. C., 2007, p. 10).

The relationship between culture and security from the constructivist paradigm of social science is echoed in the seminal work of Alexander Wendt. Wendt's discussion on this topic revolves around the concept of "identity." He describes identity as a "relatively stable, role specific understanding and expectation, about self," and adds that "actors acquire identities by participating in collective meanings" (Wendt, 1992, p. 397). Sanjoy Banerjee quotes the work of Geertz: "Constructivism views culture as an evolving system of shared meanings that govern perceptions, communications, and

Gen. David Petraeus, center, former commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force, meets with Afghan special forces troops in Kunar province in eastern Afghanistan in 2011. Petraeus is a strong voice for the importance of cultural knowledge in military operations.

action" (Banerjee, 1997, p. 29). From these two hypotheses one can argue that culture is a shared, collective meaning that gives actors their identities.

Wendt suggests that what actors do is influenced by the identities they take. He writes: "Identities are the basis of interests. Actors do not have a 'portfolio' of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situations" (Wendt, 1992, p. 398). Banerjee argues that our cultural knowledge informs an event or situation and makes us assess the situation. In a specific situation, culture dictates the expected actions, norms and behaviors to pursue:

"I treat culture as a grammar, as an evolving fund of semantic elements that can be combined in certain ways and not others to define situations, motivate and plan actions, or release emotions. Culture shapes practice in both the short and long term. At the moment of action, culture provides the elements and grammar that define the situation, that reveal motives, and that set forth a strategy for success. If the strategy is successful, that strategy is repeated in similar situations with similar motives. The perception of similarity or situations and motives is a product of the culture. Over historical time, culture distributed among many agents animates and coordinates interdependent practices. Cultures and practices reproduce together" (Banerjee, 1997, p. 29).

Culture characterizes a social group. These characteristics give the group its unique identity. By being a member of a group, an individual adheres to that group's culture, which in turn becomes a part of the identity of that individual. One individual can have several identities at the same time. And for each of those identities, there is a corresponding culture that guides and governs that identity. Since these identities guide us in interpreting situations and in making decisions as individuals, an amalgamation of all those individual decisions along with the guidelines of national culture, and the strategic, military, and political culture of the state, make the security policies and decisions of that state. On a national or international level, the culture of a country influences the strategy it will adopt. On an individual level, the culture of a person influences the decisions he or she will make.

Professor K.R. Krause looks at three distinct types of culture of a country – diplomatic, political and strategic – and argues that these "various cultural influences could play a role in determining state policies towards security building" (Krause, 1999, p. 14). He explains security culture as "enduring and widely-shared beliefs, traditions, attitudes, and symbols that inform the ways in which a state's/society's interests and values with respect to security, stability and peace are perceived, articulated and advanced" (Krause, 1999, p. 15).

Latham elaborately describes this same point in his book:

"It is assumed that security culture (as a sub-set of political, diplomatic, and strategic culture) consists of widely held systems of meaning, expressive symbols, self-understandings and values that inform the way in which a state's interest with respect to security, stability and peace are constructed and articulated. Security culture also defines a range of appropriate or acceptable behaviors; provides a corpus of widely shared but often tacit social conventions regarding approaches to security building; generates a set of inter-subjective constraints which limit consideration of alternative behaviors to less than the full range of possible options; establishes norms of diplomacy and statecraft; and defines problems and their solutions in ways that might seem irrational, counter-productive or simply cynical to observers from other societies. Understood in this way, it is clear that security culture can be expected to exercise a powerful influence on a state's non-proliferation, arms control and disarmaments policies and practices" (Latham, 1999, p. 132).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE FOR SECURITY PROFESSIONALS

Even though culture is very important in our lives and culture means a lot of things, traditionally the realm of culture has been different than the realm of security. Although there have been great kings and emperors who promoted both culture and military conquest during their reigns, security professionals and cultural professionals were traditionally very different kinds of people exhibiting a lot of suspicion towards one another.

But that is just one way of looking at culture, because culture is more than the arts; it is beliefs, customs, rituals and practices. Looked at from this angle, there ought not to be a confrontational or suspicious relationship between the two groups. In fact, security professionals can benefit from understanding culture and by acquiring cultural knowledge.

Baylis, Wirtz, and Gray discuss the use of a cultural analysis to address security problems of the current world:

"Many consider that culture has a profound impact on strategic decision-making, and in recent years there has been renewed academic and policy interest in exploring its role in international security. Scholars and practitioners have begun to study issues like democratic consolidation in Iraq, European security cooperation, the United States' relations with countries such as China, Russia, and Iran, counter-terrorism policies and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation through the lens of strategic culture" (Baylis, Wirtz, & Gray, 2010, p. 85).

Understanding culture is important for security professionals, especially strategists and policymakers, because cultural analysis provides a deeper understanding of the beliefs, values, motivations and practices of another nation. As Latham points out, "in addition to 'explaining why particular decisions resulting in a specific course of action were made,' we need to pay close attention to understanding 'how the subjects, objects, and interpretative dispositions were socially constructed such that certain practices were made possible' " (Latham, 1999, p. 131).

Michael Williams adds to this argument by observing that "rationalism and materialism are cultural practices, practices with the question of identity and the politics of security at their very core" (Williams M. C., 2007, p. 10). Baylis, Wirtz, and Gray add that "all cultures condition their members to think certain ways, while at the same time providing preset responses to given situations. Thus culture bounds our perceptions and the range of options we have for responding to events" (Baylis, Wirtz, & Gray, 2010, p. 85).

In the traditional military defense of a country, culture plays an important role in understanding the other side, and in comprehending the methods the other side may employ. Jing-Dong Yuan observes that:

"Strategic culture as a 'system of symbols' reflects a state's views on war and peace, threat perceptions, assumptions about the nature of the enemy/conflicts, and about the efficacy of the use of violence/force in resolving inter-state conflicts. It draws on accumulated historical, social and cultural experiences and informs the ways in which 'a state's/society's interest and values, with respect to security, stability and peace, are perceived, articulated and advanced by political actors and elites.' More narrowly, strategic culture can be regarded as a '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' " (Yuan, 1999, p. 87).

## AN OLD CONCEPT FOR NEW TIMES

The concept of culture shaping security strategy or policy of a country is not a new one. According to Baylis, Wirtz, and Gray, "The idea that culture could influence strategic outcomes was first captured in classic works, including the writings of Thucydides and Sun Tzu. In the nineteenth century, Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz developed this idea by identifying war and war-fighting strategy as 'a test of moral and physical force' " (Baylis, Wirtz, & Gray, 2010, p. 86). It can also be argued that Sun Tzu had advised strategists and military leaders to analyze the culture of the opponent through his famous advice of "know your enemy." Scholars showed that in the 20th century the strategic cultures of the United States, China, Japan, the Nordic countries, Germany, Russia, and India have influenced and shaped their respective security policies (Baylis, Wirtz, & Gray, 2010, pp. 93-94).

Sheila Jager and Jiyul Kim of the U.S. Army War College argue extensively about the importance of cultural knowledge in the battlefields of the 21st century (Jager, 2007) & (Kim, 2009). Jager writes: "The wide-spread recognition of the need for cultural knowledge in counterinsurgency has been noted and actively promoted recently by the [U.S.] Department of Defense (DOD)" (Jager, 2007, p. v). She continues: "Faced with a brutal civil war and insurgency in Iraq, the many complex political and social issues confronted by U.S. military commanders on the ground

have given rise to a new awareness that a cultural understanding of an adversary society is imperative if counterinsurgency is to succeed" (Jager, 2007, p. 1).

Jager suggests that the U.S. military needs three types of cultural knowledge – cultural knowledge for strategy; cultural knowledge for operations and tactics; and cultural knowledge for national strategy and policy (Jager, 2007, pp. 5, 9, and 19). She argues that the practical application type of empirical cultural knowledge needed for operations and tactics on the ground is different from the abstract notions of cultural knowledge needed for an overarching strategy and policy, but maintains that even though the three forms of cultural knowledge are distinct, they are all interrelated and complementary (Jager, 2007, p. 4).

Jager states that Gen. David Petraeus, former commanding general of the Multi-National Forces-Iraq and ISAF, was at the vanguard of the effort to increase cultural knowledge in the military and quotes him on its importance:

"Knowledge of the cultural terrain can be as important as, and sometimes even more important than, the knowledge of the geographical terrain. This observation acknowledges that the people are, in many respects, the decisive terrain, and that we must study that terrain in the same way that we have always studied the geographical terrain" (Jager, 2007, p. 1).

Jager's arguments and Petraeus' comment provide an important insight into the changes taking place inside the U.S. defense establishment towards an increasing awareness of cultural knowledge.

The deeper understanding of "the other" that cultural knowledge provides can be the essential element for victory in modern day warfare. Indeed, enhanced cultural knowledge can assist not just individual soldiers on the ground but strategists at headquarters. For soldiers on the ground, knowing the culture of the population they are working in increases the possibility of winning the ever-so-popular concept of "hearts and minds." Banerjee suggests that "[i]t is through culture that anything we might call 'interests' is constructed" (Banerjee, 1997, p. 29). With cultural knowledge soldiers can harness the opportunities provided by this understanding of the interests of "the other" and thus benefit on the battlefield. For strategists, understanding the strategic culture of "the other" can enhance the capabilities to predict their opponents' behavior. This argument is echoed in the observation of Baylis, Wirtz, and Gray, who point out that "strategic culture is the 'ideational milieu that limits behavioral choices,' from which 'one could derive specific predictions about strategic choice' " (Baylis, Wirtz, & Gray, 2010, p. 88).

## BUILDING TRUST THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

Cultural knowledge is especially important in trust building, be it in a hostile territory with an unsupportive population or among the allies and partners in planning meetings and discussions. Trust is increased when two parties find commonalities within their values, norms and practices. Alliances grow stronger with increased appreciation of the cultural traits allies share. Cultural knowledge assists people

in exploring these commonalities. In the 21st century, a time in which a global financial crisis is reducing the capabilities of countries to face many security challenges, increased trust and cooperation among allies and partners is critical.

Culture is a resource that generates products. After all, culture can be produced and culture is consumed (Yudice, 2003, pp. 9-25). The idea that culture can nurture and reinforce good things – desired values, norms, and practices – has both internal and international implications. Deeper understanding of culture can help in the counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, counterradicalization, and counterrecruitment efforts of states. Culture can be important in curbing extremism in society. Most importantly, it can be useful for increasing social cohesion, and thus in curbing the enabling environment for extremism that leads to terrorism. Within society, culture can be used for value generation or reinforcement of the cherished values of the society. Societies can reinforce all the desired and good things of a culture to make the society resilient to the unwanted narratives of the extremists.

Furthermore, culture is not always limited to geographical borders. Many aspects of a specific country's culture can travel across the globe and influence others. The international implications of culture in a globalized world are important. The performance of the New York Philharmonic in North Korea was not simply a generous gesture (Wakin, 2008). Cultural exchanges throughout history have influenced other societies and opened up pathways to change. Through the use of culture, similar values can be grown in other countries that can increase trust among those countries and decrease the threat of conflict. Michael Williams presents a hypothesis that argues that:

"Particular articulations of the relationships between culture and security have been and continue to be crucial forms of power in the production of security practices. Exemplified in claims that democracy and peace are inextricably connected, and in policies that seek to maintain, build and extend self-declared 'democratic security communities' such as NATO, these forms of power were essential to the construction of security relations in the aftermath of the Cold War, and continue to play important roles in security politics today" (Williams M. C., 2007, p. 2).

## CONCLUSIONS

Culture is a complex, dynamic, and constantly changing concept that resides in both the metaphysical, cognitive domain and in the tangible, physical domain. Culture lives within human beings, and each person adheres to many cultures either simultaneously or contextually. As members of social structures, we all interact with the cultures of societies and are guided by them. In the same manner, a nation is guided and influenced by its culture.

Culture influences security by the virtue of its influence over people in generating values, in interpreting situations, in creating expectations of the other and in making decisions. As Sheehan quotes Peter Katzenstein: "Indeed,

Young Afghan musicians perform in February 2012 at the second annual Afghanistan Winter Music Academy in Kabul. The Afghanistan National Institute of Music revived with the fall of the Taliban, which banned the playing of instruments under its strict interpretation of Islam.

the construction of security generally is crucially influenced by national and regional culture, because these help shape the way actors understand security and the threats they believe exist, and also shape their particular responses to these understandings" (Sheehan, 2005, p. 7).

Cultural knowledge is essential among security professionals in the world today. They can benefit from this knowledge in tactics, operations and strategies in the field, and in national strategies at home. But a cultural approach to improve security for a group or country is not a magic bullet. It would not solve all the problems, and it should not be expected to do so. Not everyone or every situation will equally benefit from this approach. Still, it should be considered whenever security is a matter of concern. If nothing else, a cultural approach can help us better understand each other.  □

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