

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 12, Issue 3 (2016)

Commentary

Explaining the Member States' Varying Military Engagements: the Potential of a Strategic Culture Perspective

Tim Haesebrouck, *Ghent University*

Citation

Haesebrouck, T. (2016). 'Explaining the Member States' Varying Military Engagements: the Potential of a Strategic Culture Perspective', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. 12 (3), 774 - 781.

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

An increasing number of studies examines the security and defence policies of the EU and its member states from a strategic culture perspective. This scholarship has been predominately occupied with examining whether the EU is developing its own strategic culture, mapping the differences between the strategic cultures of the member states and assessing whether these are converging into a common European strategic culture. This commentary reviews the main conclusions of this research with the goal of exploring the potential of theories on strategic culture for explaining the variation in the member states' military engagements. It concludes by arguing that increased scholarly attention to the link between the member states' strategic cultures and their military engagements would provide valuable insights into the prospects and pitfalls of increased European cooperation in security and defence.

Keywords

Strategic culture; Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP); Military operations

When looking at the turmoil swirling around Europe's immediate and wider neighbourhood, one can only conclude that military operations will, in all likelihood, continue to be a necessary instrument to protect the interests of the EU member states (Giegerich 2016). Given the decreasing willingness of the United States to assume a leading role in military interventions in and around Europe, the EU members will be more and more required to meet demands for military crisis management themselves. Moreover, crises where one member state is willing and able to conduct an operation successfully with minimal support from the rest of the EU will probably not become the standard for European military intervention. More often than not, Europeans will need to collaborate to foster sufficient resources to meet the continuous demand for military crisis management (Biscop 2015: 181).

However, the record of European troop deployments shows significant variation in the member states' patterns of military engagement. France and Britain, for example, took the lead in the 2011 operation in Libya, to which other key member states like Germany and Poland contributed nothing at all. Likewise, the majority of troops deployed in EUFOR Congo was provided by France and Germany, while the UK only participated with two staff officers in this operation. Two years later, both Germany and the UK decided not to contribute to EUFOR Chad, in which the small member states Ireland and Austria participated with 400 and 180 troops respectively. What explains these differing levels of contribution? And can these differences be overcome to the extent necessary to allow for deeper cooperation between the EU member states?

The literature on strategic culture offers relevant insights on the above questions. Lacking a unitary definition, strategic culture is generally used to refer to the shared norms, beliefs and ideas within a society on the appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives (Meyer 2006: 20; Lantis 2009: 38-39; Biehl, Giegerich and Jonas 2013a: 12). The concept of strategic culture suggests that 'different security communities think and behave somewhat differently when it comes to strategic matters' (Gray 2009: 226). Differences in the member

states' strategic cultures thus constitute a plausible explanation for their varying levels of military engagement.

After concisely setting out the key discussions that surround the concept of strategic culture, this commentary reviews the academic research that studies Europe from a strategic culture perspective and assesses the potential of this concept for explaining the member states' varying military engagements. It concludes by arguing that increased scholarly attention to the link between the member states' strategic cultures and their military engagements would provide valuable insights into the prospects and pitfalls of increased European cooperation in security and defence.

STRATEGIC CULTURE

The concept of strategic culture was introduced in modern security studies by Jack Snyder in a 1977 RAND report.ⁱ Although Snyder later moved away from the concept, his notion of strategic culture led to the emergence of 'a not insubstantial body of literature' (Longhurst 2004: 8; Zaman 2009: 73). One of the most influential scholars in the so-called first wave of this research is Colin Gray, who defined strategic culture as 'modes of thought and action with respect to force' that are derived 'from perception of the national historical experience' (Gray 1981: 22). In a 1995 article in *International Security*, Ian Johnston (1995: 45) started one of the most important debates in the subfield of strategic culture by criticising Gray and other first generation scholars for including both thoughts and behaviour in their definitions of strategic culture. To avoid this pitfall, Johnston (1995: 44) constructed a definition of strategic culture that does not include behaviour, and set out a positivist research strategy that aimed to isolate how much and which part of a state's strategic behaviour results from its strategic culture. Gray responded by arguing that Johnston was seriously in error in his 'endeavour to distinguish culture from behaviour' (1999: 50). According to Gray, 'culture is behaviour, because those responsible for the behaviour necessarily are uncultured' (1999: 55). Therefore, scholarship on strategic culture should try to interpret and understand strategic behaviour, rather than aim at predicting the impact of culture (Gray 1999: 59).

The debate between Johnston and Gray remains unresolved to date (Haglund 2014: 318). However, writing in 2009, Gray stated that he was 'less and less persuaded that that debate had, or has, any real significance' (1999: 227). Haglund, in turn, argues that the Gray-Johnston debate has outlived its usefulness, given that 'the distinction between explanation and understanding can be overdrawn' (2009: 20). Likewise, Bloomfield and Nossal contend that it is possible 'to move towards making explanatory and possibly even predictive findings' after 'having attained a thorough understanding of a particular subject' (2007: 228). Recent scholarship thus suggests that it should be possible to move beyond merely interpreting foreign policy from a strategic culture perspective and arrive at explanatory findings on the impact of strategic culture.

Notwithstanding their differences, strategic culture analysts agree that behaviour is not solely the result of material constraints and opportunities and accept that 'cultural context, and therefore history' matters (Haglund 2009: 23). However, 'culturalists' do not contend that 'culture is always, or even necessarily often, the prime determinant of decision and action' (Gray 2009: 226). Meyer argues that 'this is particularly true in the case of military interventions' (2006: 19), in which 'the influence of norms varies according to different situational factors as well as more permanent features of national decision making systems and resources'. Therefore, the differences in the member states' strategic cultures can, at best, provide a partial explanation for

their varying levels of military engagement. The following subsections review the scholarship that studies Europe from a strategic culture perspective to assess the potential of the concept for explaining the member states' varying military engagements.

TOWARDS A STRATEGIC CULTURE FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION?

A first category of academic research focusses on the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and assesses whether and to what extent the EU is developing a strategic culture. Although the operations deployed under the CSDP framework only account for a small portion of European troop deployments, this line of work is relevant for the purpose of this commentary (Haesebrouck and Van Meirvenne 2015). If such an EU strategic culture would replace or transcend the strategic cultures of the member states, the latter would become less relevant for explaining the differences between the member states' military commitments. However, scholarship suggests that such a scenario is unlikely to materialise in the foreseeable future.

Writing two years before the CSDP became fully operational, Cornish and Edwards (2001: 588) argued that there were signs that an EU strategic culture was developing. Similarly, after the first CSDP operations had just been launched, Rynning (2003: 486) argued that the member states were gaining a more coherent conception of the EU as 'a liberal force for the good of democracy' and increasingly considered the use of military means a legitimate instrument, as long as international law is not violated. However, before examining the possibility of a EU strategic culture, Rynning contended that the question of whether the EU has 'a strategic sense of purpose and utility of military force is easy to discard because of the obvious differences' (2003: 482) in the member states' national outlooks. After the burst in operational activity under the CSDP in the second half of the 2000s, Rynning maintained that strategic power and culture in Europe are still predominately national, although he did contend that there was a weak 'EU CSDP denominator' (2011: 536).

In an edited volume on European security policy and strategic culture, Schmidt and Zyla agree that there are indeed 'many indications that there exist a number of clusters of ideational and cultural preferences that guide Europe's civilian and military operations' (2011: 489). This assertion is based on theoretical and empirical articles, three of which focus on military operations deployed under the CSDP. Pentland (2011) examines EUFOR Concordia and EUFOR Althea, which suggest that the member states agree on the appropriate means for EU-led crisis management, as well as have some common interests. Following an analysis of EUFOR Artemis and EUFOR Congo, Schmidt also recognises 'some sort of EU strategic culture' (2011: 568). However, his study also demonstrates that this EU strategic culture does not replace the strategic cultures of the member states, which continue to play a dominant role in the deployment of military forces and determine the member states' contributions to CSDP operations (Schmidt 2011: 577). Haine, in turn, concludes from an analysis of EUFOR Chad that the member states' different strategic cultures cause the EU only to undertake 'figurative operations aimed at fostering the European institution itself' (2011: 598).

The dissimilar conclusions of Pentland (2011), Haine (2011) and Schmidt (2011) suggest that examining different CSDP operations results in different inferences on the extent to which the EU is developing a strategic culture. This resonates with the findings of Chappell and Petrov (2014), who examined whether the reasoning behind the deployment of EUFORs Althea, Atalanta, Congo and Chad was in line with the norms displayed in the European Security Strategy. While this was

to a large extent the case for the former two operations, the EUFORs Congo and Chad reflect French rather than European interests.

To sum up, scholarship suggests that there are at least some shared norms, ideas and beliefs on the appropriate means and ends of the CSDP, suggesting that an EU strategic culture is developing. However, the latter can be expected to coexist with or complement the 'well-developed' (Cornish and Edwards 2005: 820) national cultures of the member states, rather than replace them (Norheim-Martinsen 2011: 517). This indicates that the strategic cultures of the member states will continue to be the most important determinants of their military engagements.

THE STRATEGIC CULTURES OF THE MEMBER STATES: DIVERGING OR CONVERGING?

A second category of research focusses on the strategic cultures of the member states. First of all, a number of studies examines the security and defence policies of single member states from a strategic culture perspective and provides evidence that history and cultural context indeed matter for foreign policy behaviour (Longhurst 2004; Longhurst and Zaborowski 2007; Rosa 2016). More interesting for the purpose of the current review is research that assesses the differences between and similarities of the strategic cultures of the member states. Writing in the aftermath of the European divisions over the 2003 Iraq War, Adrian Hyde-Price argued that 'European attitudes towards the use of force are characterized by considerable heterogeneity' (2004: 324). Rather than being directly related to material power capabilities, this heterogeneity is rooted in the second half of the twentieth century and reflects the member states' different experiences during World War II and the Cold War (Hyde-Price 2004: 325). Howorth (2007: 179), in turn, contends that it would only be a slight exaggeration to contend that there are 27 distinct strategic cultures within the EU. Biehl, Giegerich and Jonas (2013a) arrive at similar conclusions. In an edited volume that presents country studies of the (then) 27 member states, they conclude that there are remarkable commonalities amongst the member states' strategic cultures, but that 'persistent differences are just as, if not more, frequent' (Biehl, Giegerich and Jonas 2013b: 396).

One of the most rigorous academic analyses of the member states' strategic cultures is presented in a book length study by Meyer (2006), who examines whether the strategic cultures of France, Germany, Poland and the UK have converged since 1989. Meyer (2006) agrees with Hyde-Price (2004) that 'collective memories of events of the first half of the 20th century' still shape threat perceptions' (Meyer 2006: 76). Nevertheless, the results of his study suggest increasing convergence on the question of the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention, a stronger role for the EU as a framework for the security and defence policy, the desirability of UN authorisation, a growing concern for domestic authorisation, the de-prioritisation of territorial defence and the appropriateness of using force to tackle security threats (Meyer 2006: 11, 169, 185). However, Meyer (2006: 11) also emphasises that convergence implies that cross-national differences have narrowed, not that national beliefs have become fully compatible. Moreover, his analysis also suggests long time incompatibility between the member states' strategic cultures on the appropriateness of using force to advance economic and political interests, for the purpose of pre-emption and in high risk situations.

Scholars who examine the member states' strategic cultures, therefore, consistently conclude that there are considerable and persistent differences between the member states' norms, beliefs and ideas regarding the goals for which the use of force is considered appropriate or legitimate (Meyer 2006: 11).

STRATEGIC CULTURE AS A DETERMINANT FOR MILITARY ENGAGEMENTS?

Many of the previously discussed works refer to the member states' behaviour in military operations to illustrate the differences in their strategic cultures. Very few studies, however, aim to explain member state contributions to military operations from a strategic culture perspective. In one of the few articles that establishes a convincing link between a member state's strategic culture and its military engagements, Dalgaard-Nielsen (2005) traces the impact of two competing schools of thought within Germany's strategic culture on its policy towards post-Cold War military operations and 'its categorical 'no' to any participation in potential military actions against Iraq' (2005: 340). Her detailed analysis suggests that Germany's strategic culture determines which type of military engagements do not provoke domestic resistance.

Schmitt (2012) examines Germany's decisions to participate in EUFOR Congo and not in EUFOR Chad. However, his case studies mainly describe how Germany's political leaders used facets of their strategic culture to legitimise decisions made for other reasons. Davidson (2011) makes a similar argument in a study on European contributions to US-led operations. Although the latter builds on a neoclassical realist framework, one of his alternative hypotheses expects that consistency between a state's identity and the 'case of intervention' makes military participation more likely (Davidson 2011: 27). This proposition is not convincingly supported by the presented case studies, which do, however, show that governments use identity and normative rhetoric to justify their decisions and reduce domestic opposition to military contributions (Davidson 2011: 177).

Strikingly, perhaps the most convincing evidence for the impact of cultural variables on European military deployments is provided in a study that considers cultural analyses as a competitor to its main argument. In an analysis of European responses to the crises in Bosnia and Kosovo, Brian Rathbun argues that cultural theories 'offer important insights on the role of the past in explaining the present, but nevertheless have difficulties in explaining change over time' (2004: 9). Although his theoretical framework focusses on the impact of political parties on military deployments, historical experiences are attributed an important role in his argument. More specifically, Rathbun contends that history is critical for explaining how left-wing parties resolve the conflict between their preferences for anti-militarism on the one hand and promoting human rights on the other. His analysis convincingly shows that leftist parties in countries with a 'positive experience with the use of force' (Rathbun 2004: 27), such as Britain and France, supported humanitarian intervention in the Balkans, while their counterparts in countries with a negative experience with the use of force, such as Germany, initially eschewed participation in these operations.

In sum, only a few studies examine the link between the member states' strategic cultures and their military engagements. The few scholars who do generally consider strategic culture as a complementary or competing explanation for their main argument but nevertheless provide evidence that strategic cultures have an impact on the member states' military engagements. However, there is no agreement on whether strategic culture only has an impact on the way elites 'sell' military contributions domestically, determines which type of military engagements do not provoke domestic resistance or frames ideological debates between left and right wing parties.

CONCLUSIONS

This review suggests that cultural theories constitute a plausible explanation for the member states' varying military engagements. First of all, there is a broad consensus that an EU strategic culture is unlikely to replace the strategic cultures of the member states, suggesting that the latter will continue to be the most important determinants for explaining the EU members' military engagements. Moreover, scholars who examine these national cultures consistently conclude that there are persistent differences between the member states' norms, ideas and beliefs regarding the use of force. Since elites embedded in different strategic cultures are expected to react somewhat differently to similar situations, the member states' diverging strategic cultures are a potential explanation for their varying contributions to military operations. The few studies that examine this conjecture provide some evidence that strategic culture plays a role in the member states' military engagements. However, there is a lack of research that systematically examines and compares the member states' military engagements from a strategic culture perspective.

This constitutes a substantial gap in the literature on European defence and security, not least because increased cooperation and specialisation in capability development is generally considered indispensable for Europe. However, deeper cooperation comes at the cost of reduced national autonomy, since each member state's ability to conduct operations would depend on its partners' willingness to grant access to their capabilities (Giegerich and Nicoll 2012: 267). If strategic culture is decisive for military engagements, fostering collaboration between member states with similar strategic cultures would be the most promising avenue for European defence and security cooperation (Biehl, Giegerich and Jonas 2013b: 395). However, given that few scholars argue culture is not the only determinant for action, systematically examining when and to what extent strategic culture has an impact on the member states' military deployments constitutes an important task for future research (Lantis 2009: 43; Biehl, Giegerich and Jonas 2013b: 399).

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS

Tim Haesebrouck, Ghent University, Universiteitstaat 8, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
[Tim.Haesebrouck@ugent.be].

ⁱⁱ An exhaustive review of the literature on strategic culture is beyond the scope of this commentary and can be found in Lantis (2009) and Zaman (2009).

REFERENCES

- Biava, A., Drent, M. and Herd, G. P. (2011) 'Characterizing the European Union's Strategic Culture: An Analytical Framework', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 49(6): 1227-1248.
- Biehl, H., Giegerich, B. and Jonas, A. (2013a) *Strategic Cultures in Europe Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent*. Potsdam: Springer.
- Biehl, H., Giegerich, B. and Jonas, A. (2013b) 'Conclusions', in H. Biehl, B. Giegerich, and A. Jonas (eds), *Strategic Cultures in Europe Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent*. Potsdam: Springer: 387-401.
- Biscop, S. (2015) 'The state of defence in Europe: dependence, deterrence and deployment', *Global Affairs* 1(2): 169-182.
- Bloomfield, A. and Nossal, K.R. (2007) 'Towards an explicative understanding of strategic culture: the cases of Australia and Canada', *Contemporary Security Policy* 28(2): 286-307.
- Chappell, L. and Petrov, P. (2014) 'The European Union's crisis management operations: Strategic culture in action?', *European Integration online Papers* 18(2): 1-24.
- Cornish, P. and Edwards, G. (2001) 'Beyond the EU/NATO dichotomy: the beginnings of a European strategic culture', *International Affairs* 77(3): 587-603.
- Cornish, P. and Edwards, G. (2005) 'The Strategic Culture of the European Union: A Progress Report', *International Affairs* 81(4): 801-820.
- Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. (2005) 'The test of strategic culture: Germany, pacifism and pre-emptive strikes', *Security Dialogue* 36(3): 339-359.
- Davidson, J. (2011) *America's Allies and War: Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giegerich, B. and Nicoll, A. (2012) 'The Struggle for Value in European Defence', *Survival* 54(1): 53-82.
- Giegerich, B. (2016) 'European military capabilities and future conflict', *European Geostrategy* 8(7). Available online: <http://www.europeangeostrategy.org/2016/03/european-military-capabilities-and-future-conflict/> [last accessed 14 June 2016].
- Gray, C. S. (2009) 'Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture', In J. L. Johnson, K. M. Kartchner and J. A. Larsen (eds), *Strategic culture and weapons of mass destruction: culturally based insights into comparative national security policymaking*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 221-242.
- Gray, C. S. (1981) 'National Style in Strategy: The American Example', *International security* 6(2): 21-47.
- Gray, C. S. (1999) 'Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back', *Review of International Studies* 25(1): 49-69.
- Haesebrouck, T and Van Meirvenne, M. (2015) 'EUFOR RCA and CSDP Crisis Management Operations: Back on Track?', *European Foreign Affairs Review* 20(2): 267-285.
- Haglund, D. G. (2009) 'What good is strategic culture?' In J. L. Johnson, K. M. Kartchner and J. A. Larsen (eds), *Strategic culture and weapons of mass destruction: culturally based insights into comparative national security policymaking*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 15-32.
- Haglund, D. G. (2014) 'What Can Strategic Culture Contribute to Our Understanding of Security Policies in the Asia-Pacific Region?', *Contemporary Security Policy* 35(2): 310-328.
- Haine, J. Y. (2011), 'The Failure of a European Strategic Culture—EUFOR Chad: The Last of its Kind?', *Contemporary Security Policy* 32(3): 582-603.
- Howorth, J. M. (2007) *Security and defence policy in the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Hyde-Price, A. (2004) 'European security, strategic culture, and the use of force', *European Security* 13(4): 323-343.
- Johnston, A. I. (1995) 'Thinking about Strategic Culture', *International security* 19(4): 32-64.
- Lantis, J. (2009) 'Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism,' In J. L. Johnson, K. M. Kartchner and J. A. Larsen (eds), *Strategic culture and weapons of mass destruction: culturally based insights into comparative national security policymaking*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 33-52.
- Longhurst, K. and Zaborowski, M. (2007) *The New Atlanticist. Poland's Foreign and Security Priorities*. London: Blackwell Publishing.
- Longhurst, K. (2004) *Germany and the use of force: The evolution of German security policy 1990-2003*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Meyer, C. O. (2006) *The quest for a European strategic culture: changing norms on security and defence in the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Norheim-Martinsen, P. M. (2011) 'EU strategic culture: When the means becomes the end', *Contemporary Security Policy* 32(3): 517-534.
- Pentland, C. C. (2011) 'From words to deeds: strategic culture and the European Union's Balkan military missions', *Contemporary Security Policy* 32(3): 551-566.
- Rathbun, B., C. (2004) *Partisan Interventions: European Party Politics and Peace Enforcement in the Balkans*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Rosa, P. (2016) *Strategic Culture and Italy's Military Behavior: Between Pacifism and Realpolitik*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Rynning, S. (2003) 'The European Union: Towards a Strategic Culture?', *Security Dialogue* 34(4): 479-496.
- Rynning, S. (2011) 'Strategic Culture and the Common Security and Defence Policy – A Classical Realist Assessment and Critique', *Contemporary Security Policy* 32(3): 535-550.
- Schmidt, P. (2011) 'The EU's military involvement in the democratic republic of Congo: security culture, interests and games', *Contemporary Security Policy* 32(3): 567-581.
- Schmidt, P. and Zyla, B. (2011) 'European security policy: Strategic culture in operation?', *Contemporary Security Policy* 32(3): 484-493.
- Schmitt, O. (2012) 'Strategic users of culture: German decisions for military action', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33(1): 59-81.
- Snyder, J.L. (1977) *The Soviet Strategic Culture. Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- Zaman, R.U. (2009) 'Strategic Culture: A "Cultural" Understanding of War', *Comparative Strategy* 28(1): 68-88.