

Volume 8

Number 3 *Volume 8, No. 3, Special Issue Fall
2015: Intelligence: Analysis, Tradecraft,
Training, Education, and Practical Application*

Article 2

Cultures, Conditions, and Cognitive Closure: Breaking Intelligence Studies' Dependence on Security Studies

Matthew Crosston

Bellevue University, matthew.crosston@modern diplomacy.eu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss>
pp. 24-45

Recommended Citation

Crosston, Matthew. "Cultures, Conditions, and Cognitive Closure: Breaking Intelligence Studies' Dependence on Security Studies." *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 3 (2015): : 24-45.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.8.3.1455>

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol8/iss3/2>

Cultures, Conditions, and Cognitive Closure: Breaking Intelligence Studies' Dependence on Security Studies

Author Biography

Dr. Matthew Crosston, Professor of Political Science, is the Miller Chair for Industrial and International Security and Director of the International Security and Intelligence Studies (ISIS) program at Bellevue University. He has authored two well-received books, several book chapters and over twenty peer-reviewed articles in venues like the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, *Journal of Strategic Security*, *International Politics*, *Journal of Military and Strategic Affairs*, *Comparative Strategy*, *Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security*, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, *Central Asian Survey*, *Journal of Global Analysis*, and *Democracy and Security*. His research agenda continues to address counter-terrorism, intelligence analysis, failed democratization, and cyber war/ethics. His works have been translated into Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Spanish, and Uzbek. In 2013 Crosston was named the Outstanding Instructor by the International Association for Intelligence Education (IAFIE). He has a BA from Colgate, MA from the University of London, and PhD from Brown.

Abstract

This paper is about how the conceptualization of 'culture' in intelligence studies has taken on too powerful a role, one that has become too restrictive in its impact on thinking about other intelligence communities, especially non-Western ones. This restriction brings about unintentional cognitive closure that damages intelligence analysis. The argument leans heavily in many ways on the fine work of Desch and Johnston in the discipline of Security Studies, who cogently brought to light over fifteen years ago how ultra-popular cultural theories were best utilized as supplements to traditional realist approaches, but were not in fact capable of supplanting or replacing realist explanations entirely. The discipline of Intelligence Studies today needs a similar 'intellectual intervention' as it has almost unknowingly advanced in the post-Cold War era on the coattails of Security Studies but has largely failed to apply the same corrective measures. This effort may be best accomplished by going back to Snyder in the 1970s who warned that culture should be used as the explanation of last resort for Security Studies.

Introduction

This article is about how a specific conceptualization of ‘culture’ in intelligence studies, amongst scholars at first but subsequently practitioners as well, has taken on too powerful a role, one that has become too restrictive on thinking about other intelligence communities, especially non-Western ones. This restriction brings about unintentional cognitive closure that hinders analysis, whether that be with the intelligence professional or the intelligence professor. My argument leans heavily on the fine work of Desch and Johnston in Security Studies, who brought to light over fifteen years ago how ultra-popular cultural theories were best utilized as supplements to traditional realist approaches but were not in fact capable of supplanting or replacing realist explanations entirely.¹ Intelligence Studies today needs a similar ‘intellectual intervention.’ As seen later in the case study section, perhaps the gravest consequence of all isn’t a concern about methodological or research model clarity, but rather the damage this all-encompassing conceptualization impacts the very cognitive processes of scholars and practitioners themselves, creating analyses that are too mystically untestable when simpler and cleaner analysis is available.

This call for a ‘Deschian’ intellectual intervention similar to the one that took place within Security Studies more than fifteen years ago offers Intelligence Studies a chance to differentiate itself from its ‘big brother’ and further solidify its place as a distinct academic discipline. Indeed, the emphasis on grand strategic cultures made sense within Security Studies (with careful restrictions as to when most appropriate), but goes against common sense when too dominant within Intelligence Studies. As a discipline, Intelligence Studies too often follows the lead of Security Studies when it would be wiser to navigate a separate path. The analytical conceptualization of culture is one of those prime opportunities. Ironically, this may be accomplished best by going back to a foundational premise in Security Studies during the 1970s that has lost some of its influential luster: Snyder’s warning that culture grandly defined should be used as an explanation of last resort.²

¹ Michael C. Desch, ‘Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies,’ *International Security* 23/1 (1998) pp. 141-170 and Alastair Iain Johnston, ‘Thinking about Strategic Culture,’ *International Security* 19/4 (1995) pp. 32-64.

² For the best explicit contextualization of this, see Edward Lock, ‘Refining Strategic Culture: Return of the Second Generation,’ *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010) pp. 685-708.

The present work will first analyze the two traditions within the literature. From there six ‘case study glances’ will be offered to show how the positive and negative traditions amongst scholars and practitioners alike have produced dramatically different approaches and conclusions about foreign intelligence organizations. In all, China, North Korea, Russia, Romania, Turkey, and Spain will be highlighted. The insights garnered will then bring in contemporary discussions about transforming and adapting intelligence studies and how the present argument could be a positive influence on that process. Finally, two empirical examples (the emergence of radical Islam in the 1990s and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014) will be used to show how dangerous cognitive closure, caused by grand strategic culture, can be when examining the American intelligence community and how approaches focusing on organizational culture would have been more powerful.

In the early literature within Intelligence Studies there were two traditions of ‘culture’ which, while affiliated with each other, were still quite distinct. The more prevalent version dealt with intelligence culture (i.e., as it was practiced by actual intelligence professionals) more in the manner of organizational culture, with its commensurate corporate-like elaborations. A second broader version co-existed alongside this, tied more intimately with the concept of a country’s strategic culture grandly defined. This version had intelligence cultures as a fairly accurate mimic or mirror of the greater strategic national culture. Every country’s strategic culture was seen as inevitably unique, tied together by a complex web of language, history, local custom, religion, and ethnicity. In time, Intelligence Studies as a discipline shifted from that more humble and explicit conceptualization of culture to the latter, grander one that is inherently mysterious and semi-knowable, as it relies on more esoteric and highly subjective characteristics.

The consequence is important: This ambiguous conceptualization can actually cause scholars and practitioners alike to get bogged down searching for the ‘intrinsic essences’ of a grand strategic culture when all they should rightly focus on is how national security priorities can evolve. This article argues these shifts are more powerful explanatory factors for determining state security behavior. It is very much like a corporate mindset. For some reason Intelligence Studies over time has deemphasized this simple reality and made understanding the priorities of intelligence communities more dependent on considering a state’s unique grand strategic culture. For example, countries like Russia or Iran are always interpreted through more esoteric, almost philosophical positions related to Soviet empire nostalgia or Ayatollah chauvinism, rather than considering the very real likelihood that their

respective intelligence communities operate in a similar manner to the American, prizing pragmatic, unambiguous information. This process is fascinatingly similar to the cognitive closure discussed by Hatlebrekke and Smith.³ In short, emphasizing ‘grand strategic cultures’ to understand foreign intelligence agencies induces its own cognitive closure amongst scholars and practitioners alike.

Thus, the argument here is both a gentle rebuke against how the concept of grand strategic culture has evolved to dominate the field and a plea to return to the more accurate tradition of corporate-like organizational culture as a primary independent variable for examining intelligence communities. The proposal here is to adopt the term ‘condition’ to represent the organizational concept of culture and allow the grand strategic concept of culture to maintain its naming rights. This piece hopes to create more open discussions within intelligence studies as a discipline that include multiple explanatory frameworks and the creation of a free and vibrant exchange of ideas about how culture is viewed and applied as both an analytical concept within the discipline and how intelligence professionals engage (and do not engage) it. To understand intelligence communities, one need not be a prophet of a country’s particular and parochial grand strategic culture. Rather, the need is to focus on the dynamic organizational conditions that evolve, create friction, and produce change—sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly—within the intelligence community agencies in question.

Grand Strategic Culture and Intelligence Studies: Fighting the *Deus Ex Machina*

Examining the impact of culture on intelligence is in actuality not a recent investigation. Bonthous specifically tackled the issue over two decades ago.⁴ Unfortunately, that work showed the dichotomy that would come to epitomize the treatment of culture within Intelligence Studies overall. Indeed, on the one hand it discusses briefly that cultures can and do evolve and as such lead to intelligence practices that also adapt and change. But the concession is rather quickly overwhelmed by grand strategic culture by testifying to its power as something shared “across religions, levels of education, social networks, companies and industries...even transcending

³ Kjetil Anders Hatlebrekke and M.L.R. Smith, ‘Towards a New Theory of Intelligence Failure? The Impact of Cognitive Closure and Discourse Failure,’ *Intelligence and National Security* 25/2 (2010) pp. 147-182.

⁴ J. M. Bonthous, ‘Understanding intelligence across cultures’, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 7/3 (1994) pp. 7-34.

ethnic groups” and as such will inevitably foster or inhibit intelligence.⁵ Thus, the influence of national culture on intelligence will only become more important over time and in that Bonthous helped propel a self-fulfilling prophecy within Intelligence Studies. The justification for this premise is based on how ‘national culture’ was ultimately defined:

“Culture is the one element that weaves a homogeneous social fabric and survives mergers, acquisitions, and cross-border standardizations...Culture has deep, permanent roots in language, which, from birth, encodes images, concepts, and patterns of thinking into the people...Throughout life, both language and culture serve as a means of perceiving, representing and relating; hence the importance of language in shaping culture and the importance of culture in shaping intelligence.”⁶

It would be natural to think this ebullient description was just a consequence of culture’s fame and popularity across many different disciplines in the early 1990s, especially Security Studies. But this does not hold when the work of Duyvesteyn in 2011 is taken into consideration.⁷ Nearly two decades later, the other primary peer-reviewed journal in the discipline dedicated an entire special issue to what was now called ‘strategic culture’ and its impact on intelligence writ large. Duyvesteyn’s enthusiasm, if anything, exceeded the original ebullience of Bonthous:

“Strategic culture can be read from a whole list and combination of sources: geography, climate, resources, history, experience, political structure, nature of organizations involved, myths and symbols, key texts and documents that inform actors of the appropriate action, transnational norms, generational change, and the role of technology. There are several custodians of strategic culture, such as elites, political institutions, public opinion, popular culture, and civil society.”⁸

The problem with the above formulation should be clear: The evolution of the concept from ‘national culture’ to ‘strategic culture’ has basically created a *deus ex machina* in Intelligence Studies. We have come to define culture so

⁵ Ibid. p.8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Isabelle Duyvesteyn, ‘Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Some Observations,’ *Intelligence and National Security* 26/4 (2011) pp. 521-530.

⁸ Ibid. p. 524.

broadly and grandly that nearly everything analyzed has fallen beyond its event horizon. Using such a definition creates several research nightmares: how are competing variables controlled? How are the multiple causal variables above parsed out and made distinct? How can any explanation based on such conceptualization be falsifiable? Perhaps the gravest consequence of all isn't so much about methodology or rigor, but the negative impact this esoteric conceptualization has on the very cognitive processes of scholars and practitioners, creating analyses that are too reliant on semi-mystical characterizations when simpler and less ambiguous investigations are available.

Even more fascinating, the tendency to 'qualify but elevate' continues: Duyvesteyn herself declares that not enough work has been done on culture within intelligence and that while "the concept of culture is undisputed...many now prefer to see it as a context for understanding rather than possessing a clear causal and linear relationship with human behavior."⁹ Just as with Bonthous two decades before, Intelligence Studies today tends to qualify the causal power of grand strategic culture only to then envelope all analysis under its banner. This is why some scholarly work needs to be reclaimed back into the more subtle organizational camp. The most exemplary work of this kind belongs to Davies and what he has done on British and American intelligence. Most scholars have taken his work to represent an affirmation of grand strategic culture when in fact its highest power comes from an organizational cultural approach:

"Philip Davies has concluded in his study of intelligence cultures in the United States and the United Kingdom that the culture of the British intelligence apparatus tends toward an integrative intelligence culture, while the American intelligence culture could be more accurately characterized as disintegrative. These *distinctive cultures* are prone to specific weak points; integrative cultures are highly sensitive to groupthink and disintegrative cultures to turf wars."¹⁰

Davies is rather explicit in not trying to make his conclusions grandly cultural from a strategic perspective. It is the subsequent scholarly citations of his work that place him in the grand culture camp. But instead of highlighting amorphous and undefined distinctive cultures (language often used in the

⁹ Ibid. p. 521.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 526-527.

grand strategic tradition), the discoveries of Davies are better understood through organizational structure.

Might the highly disintegrative tendencies of American intelligence, commensurate with the danger of turf wars, be accounted for more powerfully and explicitly by looking at its massive size subdivided into seventeen competing intelligence agencies? Might the integrative trends within British intelligence, commensurate with the dangers of groupthink, be accounted for more readily and clearly by its lack of compartmentalization and segregation? The corporate organizational structure of the intelligence communities themselves is integrative and disintegrative. The so-called grand strategic cultures of the two respective countries are not nearly as explanatory without leaps of logic.

This tendency happens again and again in Intelligence Studies, where scholars claim to not necessarily be beholden to a grand strategic cultural approach, but then spend an inordinate amount of time being just that:

“Strategic culture is of course a very broad concept but it very well suits the treatment of intelligence problems...The main sources of strategic culture are amongst others history, experience, political structure, myths and symbols, key texts, resources and technology. There are several main keepers of strategic culture such as elites, political institutions, public opinion, civil society, and popular culture.”¹¹

The important piece by Aldrich and Kasuku superbly affirms the somewhat spastic inconsistency with which the discipline tries to deal with culture. Beginning with the noble cause of freeing the West from its self-imposed constraint of an ethnocentric Anglo-Saxon conception of intelligence, the piece confesses to the difficulty of creating new models. What is missed is that this difficulty is based not just on a search for new models but for new ‘grand strategic cultural’ models, just ones that aren’t ethnocentrically Anglo-Saxon. They admit that culture is a slippery concept but acquiesce to the fact that the notion of ‘strategic cultures commands wide consensus.’¹² This consensus has a stranglehold on Intelligence Studies:

¹¹ Joop Van Reijn, ‘Intelligence and Strategic Culture: Essays on American and British Praxis since the Second World War,’ *Intelligence and National Security* 26/4 (2011) p. 442.

¹² Richard J. Aldrich and John Kasuku, ‘Escaping from American Intelligence: culture, ethnocentrism, and the Anglosphere,’ *International Affairs*, 88/5 (2012) p. 1014

“Culture constrains how we think our intelligence institutions relate to a globalizing world, what tasks we think they should perform and what we think intelligence might be. In this wider sense, we are all potentially prisoners in the ethnocentric dungeon...Culture is partly about difference, and each intelligence community has its own unique interface with national strategy. Appreciating the importance of associated norms and values is central to understanding how they function.”¹³

The very voices claiming culture’s uncertain impact within intelligence go on to produce research that is an affirmation of culture’s power. Perhaps more problematic, the axiomatic acceptance of culture is analytically omnivorous – devouring everything and blocking efforts to offer alternatives that are less grand but more empirically explanatory. Thankfully, there are other voices. There is a significant but small counter-literature that holds great promise in pushing less grand cultural theories of intelligence.

Organizational Conditions in Intelligence Studies: A Foundation to Build Upon

The work of Desch and Johnston in the mid-1990s figure most prominently as cautionary warnings issued to the Strategic Studies discipline. First, for Desch, cultural variables were tricky to define and operationalize; second, some cultural theorists believed that cultural variables make every case *sui generis*, and so the theories cannot be broadly generalized or applicable across many cases; third, cultural theories did not outperform ‘hard cases’ in comparison to realist theories, which was essential if cultural approaches really were going to become the go-to approach in Security Studies.¹⁴ The dilemma for Desch of cultural vs. realist theories matches up well with the present concern about grand strategic cultures vs. organizational conditions.

While Security Studies did indeed wish to produce general theories of security behavior writ large, it is not rational to think a similar general theory of intelligence community behavior can or even should be developed globally. Desch’s central problem with cultural theories is the same problem with how Intelligence Studies scholars tend to use grand strategic cultural approaches to explain foreign intelligence community agencies: These approaches are not

¹³ Ibid. pp. 1016, 1027.

¹⁴ Michael C. Desch, ‘Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies,’ *International Security* 23/1 (1998) pp. 141-170.

better, nor more complete, nor provide more accurate explanations on behavior.

This holds even more powerfully with the work of Johnston, whose mid-90s review of strategic culture revealed it to be *both* under-determined and over-determined simultaneously and unable to offer a convincing research design for isolating actual causal effects.¹⁵ Indeed, his warning that the link between strategic culture and behavior needed to be handled with extreme care (because there had been no success in revealing a direct link between the two) is prescient:

“Most of those who use the term ‘culture’ tend to argue, explicitly or implicitly, that different states have different predominant strategic preferences that are rooted in the early or formative experiences of the state, and are influenced to some degree by the philosophical, political, cultural, and cognitive characteristics of the state and its elites. Ahistorical or ‘objective’ variables such as technology, polarity, or relative materials capabilities are all of secondary importance. It is strategic culture, they argue, that gives meaning to these variables [but offer no real evidence to support the supposition.]”¹⁶

Consequently, an analytical calculus cannot be provided that compellingly shows the relationship between culture and behavioral choice.¹⁷ Thus analyses within Intelligence Studies, when based on grand strategic cultural approaches, will always be a bit too deterministic and tautological (i.e., the French do that because they are French and the French have always been that way).

This fits perfectly with the concept of cognitive closure by Hatlebrette and Smith, who argued brilliantly about the detrimental effect it has specifically on intelligence analysis:

“It is helpful to understand cognitive closure as the force that manifests itself as assumptions, orthodoxies, and habits. Anything that questions or puts these assumptions, orthodoxies and habits under scrutiny, thus threatens established conceptions of the world. Cognitive closure is therefore a way in which humans protect

¹⁵ Alastair Iain Johnston, ‘Thinking about Strategic Culture,’ *International Security* 19/4 (1995) pp. 32-64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 44.

themselves against any challenge to a secure and comforting understanding of the world.”¹⁸

Hatlebrekke and Smith rightly contended that intelligence organizations might be able to improve analysis by embracing the uncertainty of reality and resist the urge to find solutions that would neatly fit inside of preconceived notions and predetermined orders of emphasis.¹⁹

Hume argued that custom is the dominant guide for human life. Hatlebrekke and Smith connected custom as one of the biggest dangers to human imagination and therefore one of the greatest dangers to accurate threat assessment.²⁰ An approach that moves away from grand pronouncements about immutable culture will best describe the world intelligence communities actually operate in: One comprised of societies undergoing dynamic social, political, and economic adjustments, therefore facing threats that also always change.²¹ While change, especially rapid change, can be an inherently difficult thing for intelligence community practitioners and Intelligence Studies scholars, analytical approaches need to be highly adaptable, reflective, dynamic, and not prone to ‘custom thinking’ or enduring orthodoxies. Failing to do that is evidence of how Intelligence Studies as a discipline and a profession can create its own cognitive closure.

While there is no doubt that Intelligence Studies will always be a close cousin to Security Studies, with both researching many of the same problems and concerned about similar dangers and riddles, it is time for Intelligence Studies to acknowledge that riding the analytical coattails of Security Studies will not always lead it down the right path for its priorities. Today, Security Studies is undergoing a reformulation of strategic cultural theory so that greater relevance is placed on the political practices of those involved in actual strategy. In other words, instead of arguing that certain states engage in specific behavior because of their unique and inherent strategic cultures, many are now calling for a more critical analysis of its own assumptions and allow for greater investigations into the daily organizational minutiae that

¹⁸ Kjetil Anders Hatlebrekke and M.L.R. Smith, “Towards a New Theory of Intelligence Failure? The Impact of Cognitive Closure and Discourse Failure,” *Intelligence and National Security* 25/2 (2010) pp. 147-182.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 150.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*

might impact modern strategy decisions.²² If Security Studies can do this, then Intelligence Studies certainly must do so as well.

Examining Foreign Intelligence Community Cultures: The Bipolarity of Intelligence Studies

Common complaints within Intelligence Studies about the examination of foreign intelligence community agencies, especially those not residing in the West, run the gamut: Too historically driven; completely ahistorical and thus nothing more than a simple organizational review of facts and details; too often inevitably compared against a standard framework that uses either the United States or the United Kingdom as the backdrop. Such analyses have failed to look at how competing conceptualizations of culture engender entirely different approaches and therefore radically different conclusions about said organizations. This section will give six ‘case glances’ of this phenomenon, three positive and three negative: China, North Korea, and Russia on the negative side and Romania, Turkey, and Spain on the positive. The cases are a mix between scholar- and practitioner-produced, thus showing this problem is not just the imagination of academics but has bled into the professional field as well. Perhaps most interesting and unexpected was how states that play a bigger role on the global stage in terms of security affairs seem to be more hurt analytically, as grand strategic culture dominates their analyses and organizational cultural conditions are often never utilized for evaluations.

Russian Federation

Despite every effort by intelligence officials within the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War to instill a new foreign policy strategy and to instigate new relations based on ideas of multi-polarity and balanced global power, most American analyses of Russia cannot seem to get past characterizing every Russian maneuver and interest in a grand strategic cultural way. When this is done, Russian intelligence is inevitably seen as aspiring to help the state achieve new ‘great power’ status or attempting to reconstitute Soviet glory or is subconsciously beholden to an autocratic instinct that dates even further back, to the czars or even back to Byzantium.²³

²² Edward Lock, “Refining Strategic Culture: Return of the Second Generation,” *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010) pp. 685-708.

²³ For two exemplary standards of this kind of literature see Norbert Eitelhuber, “The Russian Bear: Russian Strategic Culture and What it Implies for the West,” *The Quarterly Journal* Winter (2009) pp. 1-28 and K.C. Gustafson, “Echo of Empires: Russia’s

This type of cognitive closure is detrimental to American intelligence and diplomacy because it is purposefully limiting the engagement between the two sides. In many ways the United States, both in terms of its scholarship and diplomatic efforts, has blindly created self-fulfilling prophecies when it comes to the Russian Federation because of a repeated inability to see past its own reliance on grand strategic culture as the chief defining point for understanding Russians. This is what led outstanding scholars like Samuel Huntington as early as 1993 to make statements like, ‘if, as the Russians stop behaving like Marxists, they reject liberal democracy and *begin behaving like Russians* but not like Westerners, the relations between Russia and the West could again become distant and conflictual.’²⁴ It is in the same vein that scholars think the modern day has no real relevance on understanding Russian foreign policy and national security prioritization. This incredulous overreliance on ancient culture, where scholars and practitioners alike believe the roots of all Russian decisions in 2015 require an understanding of the Russian soul from 500, even 1000, years before, leads American analysts down a rabbit hole of quasi-mysticism and vague truisms.²⁵ This is why so many Russian intelligence officials today will privately scoff at American intelligence analysis about Russia, whether it is from the ivory tower or Foggy Bottom:

“Of *the organization* of the Soviet and subsequent Russian state we can draw no specific indication of Byzantine bureaucratic organization, but *in spirit* the way the Soviets organized their government for security purposes is still quite Russian...the way the Byzantines managed their security and intelligence was a function of the political culture of the state, the same political culture that was inherited later by the Kievan and then Russian state, which has served the Soviet and subsequent post-Soviet Russian state.”²⁶

The above is truly a common exemplar of the kind of analysis that passes for grand strategic culture when examining Russian intelligence. Not only are the arguments non-scientific, they are ultimately spurious: These analyses are not trying to ascertain the true motivations of contemporary Russian intelligence decisions. Rather, they are trying to make sure Russia stays

Inheritance of Byzantine Security Culture,” *Journal of Slavic Military Culture* 23 (2010) pp. 574-596.

²⁴ Eitelhuber, “The Russian Bear: Russian Strategic Culture,” p. 20.

²⁵ K.C. Gustafson, “Echo of Empires,” p. 576.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 591.

within the historic-cultural frame that already exists. This is cognitive closure at its worst: The question ‘why do they do what they do?’ transforms instead into ‘what kind of Russia do we want and how do we make sure it becomes that and that alone?’²⁷ Grand strategic cultural thinking on Russian intelligence reveals relatively little about modern Russian thinking for American analysts, but it reveals a wealth of information on American thinking for Russian analysts.

North Korea

Some of the more interesting analyses on North Korea are coming out of the Korean peninsula itself, from native scholars with a personal stake in the future of the Hermit Kingdom. It is fascinating to see how the pervasive impact of grand strategic culture has filtered out:

“[To understand North Korea, we] will apply the concept of strategic culture, which refers to the way a nation’s traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements, and methods of environmental adaptation [in the face of] threat and use of force...These beliefs and values emanate from such fundamental influences as geopolitical setting, history, and political culture. They collectively constitute a strategic culture that persists over time and influences the formation and execution of strategy.”²⁸

The problem begins with the analytical tendency to define strategic culture in such a way that it becomes basically a witches’ brew of so many divergent variables that one can explain absolutely everything while saying nothing. If anything the definition of strategic culture above goes even further than some of the earlier definitions elaborated. But there seems to be the greater possibility of moving away from grand strategic culture because of the frustration that it leaves little flexibility for new engagement. In North Korea’s case some are starting to discuss the concept of ‘comprehensive security’ so as to incorporate ‘low politics,’ focusing on specific daily tasks and issue areas.²⁹

The elaboration of comprehensive security is eerily similar to the organizational cultural conditions approach. Most important is to see Korean scholars and practitioners declaring ‘strategic culture’ too rigid and

²⁷ Eitelhuber, “The Russian Bear: Russian Strategic Culture,” p. 24.

²⁸ Yong-Pyo Hong, “North Korea’s Strategic Culture and Threat Perception: Implications for Regional Security Cooperation,” *Korea Observer* 42/1 (2011) p. 96-97.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 111.

constraining when what is most readily needed is an approach that allows dynamic complex reality to have more causal sway. The failure to engage such new approaches is seen as dooming the peninsula to intelligence analysis that is going to be a vicious circle of negative geopolitical, historical, and ideological legacies.³⁰

China

Unlike the Korean peninsula, Chinese scholarship seems still interested in the power of grand strategic culture as an explanation for national security behavior. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any innovation in how the Chinese embrace the concept compared to the Americans. Consequently, Chinese analysis of its own national security and intelligence community tends to be somewhat incoherent if not cliché:

“China has a long history with 5000 years of splendid civilization...the year 1840 is a turning point of not only ancient China’s history but also ancient China’s national security. The year 1949 is another turning point for China’s national security. Contemporary China is a continuation of historical China...China’s national security is deeply affected by her traditional culture and history...China is accustomed to a set philosophy and standard rules in which to engage and watch the world...This impacts Chinese thinking, judgment, behavior, as well as influences China’s national security.”³¹

Informally, this should be called the Sun-Tzu syndrome: There should be a challenge in academia for anyone covering Chinese security and intelligence to write without somehow using a reference to Sun-Tzu as the catch-all explanation to properly understand the Chinese world view. Again, keep in mind the important distinction made between Security Studies, where such grand cultural legacies can and should enter the thinking of scholars, and Intelligence Studies, where more pragmatic analyses based on corporate organizational thinking is more powerful for understanding intelligence agencies. The goal is not to dismiss strategic culture as a concept for all of academia: rather it is to illustrate how often it gets improperly overused

³⁰ Ibid. p. 110-111.

³¹ Chen Ou, ‘The Characteristics of China’s National Security,’ *Journal of Politics and Law* 4/1 (2011) pp. 84; 92. It should be noted that this native piece suffered from poor written English. I took the liberty of cleaning up the grammar and proper flow of the English language to make the point of the author more coherent to native English readers. In no way was the substantive content or analytical argument of the original author changed or degraded.

within Intelligence Studies and subsequently hinders the power and accuracy of such analyses.

These three ‘case glances’ reveal a stark tendency: countries that have a major role on the global stage seem to be stuck in the grand strategic cultural trap. Sometimes this trap is set by others (Russia); other times this trap is largely set by the countries themselves (North Korea and China). Regardless, the end result is the same: diatribes about ‘crucially important’ ancient wisdoms and historical ghosts that do not reveal much empirical insight on actual contemporary intelligence within said countries. The following three cases all involve ‘lesser’ countries in terms of their global prominence within security and intelligence. How they differ, however, proves quite interesting for the arguments being made here.

Spain

Somehow Spain has managed to avoid the ‘curse of Isabelle and Ferdinand’ when it comes to how it evaluates its own intelligence community. In Spain’s case, there is remarkable focus on the organizational cultural conditions and as a result Spanish analysis tends to be more dynamic, adaptable, and empirically engaged.

“Spain’s IC represents a clear problem of articulation which prevents it from becoming a satisfactory instrument for elaborating the country’s foreign and security policy. The existing legal framework in Spain enables a plurality of formations and evolutions so that in principle there is no need for a new legal regulation; there is, however, an urgent need for reflection at the highest level on the model of community that Spain needs and wants, and its consequent formalization so that all the actors involved will know what kind of model the Executive wants, the role to be played by each actor and the mechanisms to be followed for its coordination and control.”³²

The differentiation in language, focus, and execution of analysis could not be more dramatic. There is no kvetching about lost empire or the need to somehow honor the enduring spiritual debt of the Spanish Armada. And make no mistake: the manner in which grand strategic cultural analysis tends to be used in Intelligence Studies would demand this kind of language. If

³² Antonio M. Diaz Fernandez, “The Spanish Intelligence Community: A Diffuse Reality,” *Intelligence and National Security* 25/2 (2010) p.242.

Russia is dependent on the legacy of the Byzantine Empire and China is hard-pressed to move beyond the ideas of Sun-Tzu, then it is simply hypocritical to not make Spain beholden to the same type of historical and cultural legacies. Yet these native scholars are not beholden to it. What is their main concern when analyzing the contemporary formulation and future of the Spanish intelligence community is the laws, human agents, organizations, contemporary security priorities, and the complex dynamic interplay between the various vested actors?

When the focus remains tight on these organizational cultural conditions, scholarship tends to be more empirically accurate, capable of being tested by others, and open to change (a crucial constant in today's world of intelligence community operations). The previous three cases, all overly dependent on emphasizing grand strategic culture, lacked all of these qualities and as a result produced analytical results that were less than informative.

Turkey

Turkey intensifies the characteristics seen in the Spanish case. Analyses on Turkish intelligence tend to be dominated by the ever-changing current and future developments of the Turkish state. Rather than trying to adhere to some ancient tract that demands a particular mindset and behavioral tactic, Turkish intelligence by default must be ready to always adjust and adapt to the unpredictable domestic and foreign policy winds.

“What intelligence is the Turkish intelligence community interested in? First and foremost, it is concerned with any intelligence that would contribute to national security and public safety. A second interest is solid intelligence that would support Turkey's active role and interest in balancing the influence of Iran and Russia in the Balkan, Middle Eastern, and Caucasian triangle, which is the primary focus of Turkey's regional security policies. Third, it is seeking good quality foreign intelligence to allow the government to have a modicum of international influence.”³³

Just as with Spain, Turkey emphasizes the *now* when it evaluates and assesses its intelligence community. There is no point droning on about the legacy of the Ottoman Empire or the spirit of Ataturk or what it historically means to be the Western-Eastern crossroads for humanity. These cultural

³³ Stephane Lefebvre, “Turkey's Intelligence Community in Changing Times,” *International Journal* 61/1 (2005-2006) p. 113.

and historical legacies *matter* if you are a Turk. But they do not explicitly and powerfully *impact* Turkish intelligence as it watches what happens in Syria, or tries to decide how to respond to the Islamic State, or considers various overtures from the United States, Israel and the EU on hindering Iranian nuclear development, or grows weary about a strengthening Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq, just to name several prominent contemporary examples.

Grand strategic cultural approaches have very little to say to these real-time dilemmas and it is these priorities that occupy the thinking of Turkish intelligence today. So, analysis that wants to properly evaluate the national security decision-making calculus of Turkey is much better off focusing on the organizational cultural conditions that demand the attention, budget, and leadership of Turkish intelligence. The explanatory power of these analyses is in the substantive relevance that can be addressed when not shackled by ancient historical and cultural legacies. They make for wonderful stories but not very compelling intelligence product.

Romania

Fascinatingly, Romania seems to be a state that has actually adopted organizational cultural conditions not simply as an academic approach for intelligence analysis but as an actual corporate philosophy for its intelligence community. It recently pushed for developing the cognitive skills of its intelligence agents, seeking to formalize an educational reform program that can produce intelligence leaders that have “deep and flexible multidimensional thinking.”³⁴ The reasoning for this push is that Romanian intelligence believes the ability to produce creative solutions to complex operational and strategic problems is hugely impactful for reducing future conflicts.³⁵ Romanian intelligence has made a direct causal link between organizational culture and proper cognitive functioning that should be the envy of Intelligence Studies scholars:

“Specific cognitive skills require critical evaluation of the results of new research, the formulation of alternative understandings and the demonstration of relevance, including the creative application of research methods and the design and management of domain-specific processes...*The fundamentals of organizational culture* [that we apply

³⁴ Constantin Stan and George Negru, “Culture of Intelligence and the Training of the Intelligence Officers,” *National Defence University Special Report* (2012) pp. 167-173.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 170.

to future intelligence officers] should be based on the progressive transformation of our leaders so that we institutionalize such training in terms of conceptual and decision-making factors so that we exhibit interdisciplinary thinking that is *fast, adaptable, proactive, open, flexible, and unconventional...*"³⁶

The last sentence epitomizes why this approach is superior to grand strategic cultural concerns for Intelligence Studies: *Any* intelligence community operating around the world today would testify to the importance of being fast, adaptable, proactive, and flexible. It is the inability to be such things that leads to intelligence failure. So it should not be surprising that the inability to be that intellectually also leads to faulty or imprecise research within Intelligence Studies.

What these cases powerfully exposed was the dramatic difference in analytical end-product: An emphasis on grand strategic culture will make for better reading, as one is taken down a road of the most interesting historical impacts, sometimes going back thousands of years. Organizational cultural conditions will instead examine budget concerns, internal turf wars over specific issue-areas, and the changing dynamics of micro-subjects that might not even make the article, let alone an historical novel. But those are the things that reveal the most about the contemporary prioritizing of intelligence communities. More importantly, the more powerful intelligence countries are dominated by grand strategic cultural analyses. Perhaps that is a reason so little headway is made engaging intelligence communities like China, Russia, and North Korea.

Hope for the 'Lesser Culture:' New Research into Intelligence Transformation

While this work has shown how quickly cognitive closure occurs within grand strategic cultural approaches in intelligence analysis, both from a scholarly and practitioner perspective, both within the United States and far beyond it, it has also shown that there are counter-approaches being developed to wean Intelligence Studies off of such overreliance. At the moment, these approaches are disparate and terminologically diverse, which actually prevents scholars from realizing they are working within the same school of thought. But there have been in the last half dozen years some stirrings on this front which will hopefully continue to grow and advance. If successful, it

³⁶ Ibid. p. 172.

will emphasize the power of purpose-based decision-making rather than predetermined thought-processes for intelligence analysis and research.

The work of an intelligence community is by default messy. Not only does it normally have to tackle extremely diverse, even radically contradictory, threats and forces, it usually has to deal with an internal bureaucracy that is highly compartmentalized.³⁷ It is surprising, therefore, that the effort to increase efficiency to improve intelligence analysis is really not that old. Hammond was one of the first to examine the creation, post-9/11, of purpose-based centers that were intended to ensure the integration and coordination of terrorism-related information held anywhere within the intelligence community.³⁸ But as was seen in Spain and Turkey and Romania, there is a problem here with semantics: purpose-based is really nothing more than a shift toward emphasizing organizational cultural conditions over grand strategic theory. It is the reincorporation of daily foci to a place of prominence in intelligence evaluation.

This same effort occurred just two years after Hammond's work in 2009 at Harvard's Kennedy School with the Defense Leadership Project. Born out of the so-called frustration with leadership within the U.S. Intelligence Community (characterized as routinely being ill-equipped to understand, visualize, or respond effectively to the *modern security environment*), it found the solution to the problem in adaptation.³⁹ A significant problem hindering the power of these approaches is the failure to realize how much they are all about the competing conceptualizations of culture. Cognitive closure caused by grand strategic culture is what causes leadership to be ill-equipped to understand the modern environment. This is because grand strategic culture does not try to evolve with contemporary realities: It tries to sledgehammer the messy complexity of contemporary reality into its own historically-predetermined boxes.

To a large extent this piece is trying to affirm Immerman's work on transforming analysis and supports his classification of this effort as something more than just a random series of chance scholarly encounters:

³⁷ Thomas H. Hammond, "Why is the Intelligence Community so Difficult to Redesign? Smart Practices, Conflicting Goals, and the Creation of Purpose-Based Organizations," *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 20/3 (2007) pp. 401-422.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp.419-421.

³⁹ Defense Leadership Project, "Transforming the National Security Culture," *Harvard Kennedy School* (2009) pp. 9-35.

“The movement, and it is a movement, to reform and thereby improve intelligence analysis goes by the title Analytic Transformation...Analytic Transformation’s goal is as simple as it is dramatic: to get the right analysis to the right people at the right time, in a form they can use. The strategy is equally commonsensical: to transform the analytic component of our community from a federation of agencies, or a collection of feudal baronies, into a community of analysts.”⁴⁰

The cacophony of diverse terms continues. These efforts to overcome “feudal baronies, ill-equipped leadership, and face more efficiently a complex messy reality” are intensified and improved by a switch to the so-called ‘lesser culture.’⁴¹ As Immerman attested to, the transition from bipolarity to globalization has meant in the intelligence world a switch to new phenomena, challenges, and threats, many of which are asymmetrical, obscure, highly evolving, non-traditional, and fast moving.⁴² The Analytic Transformation ‘movement’ highlighted above is accomplished more competently by focusing on organizational cultural conditions. These various groups are already speaking the language of the approach without realizing it.

Conclusion: Stepping Out of the Shadow of Security Studies

What works for scholars within Security Studies will not necessarily work well for scholars in Intelligence Studies. There are two final examples to share to illustrate how nefarious and limiting cognitive closure can be when it comes to the application of culture in intelligence research and analysis: The American intelligence reaction to the rise of radical Islam in the 1990s, specifically al-Qaida, and the current conflict today in Eastern Ukraine. Examining these two incidents show how easy it is to be really smart in intelligence and still fail.

There are numerous scholarly, diplomatic, and journalistic confirmations testifying to the fact that the United States always had ample opportunity to understand the threat Usama bin Laden (UBL) and al-Qaida represented to the country. While this ‘intelligence failure’ has been examined from numerous sides - communication gaps, bureaucratic infighting, turf wars—what has been largely ignored is the fact that America’s national myopia on

⁴⁰ Richard H. Immerman, ‘Transforming Analysis: The Intelligence Community’s Best Kept Secret,’ *Intelligence and National Security* 26/2-3 (2011) p.163.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 165.

⁴² *Ibid.*

this issue can be cogently explained by its over-reliance on grand strategic culture. This dictated that America was impervious to any external terrorist threat. This is only more bitterly ironic (and affirmation of how psychologically deep grand strategic cultural cognitive closure can go) given that the ‘failed’ 1993 World Trade Center attack was a failure simply because it did not succeed in leveling the building. Analysts seem to have ignored the success of actually gaining access to and detonating an explosive device within its grounds. If intelligence analysts had focused on the more organizational cultural conditions, then all of the aforementioned information could have gained greater focus and relevance and the ‘success’ aspect of the 1993 operation would have triggered much greater investigation.

This analytical blind spot in intelligence has been documented for some time but never connected before to the concept of cognitive closure. Studies going as far back as Pearl Harbor have shown that the country attacked has almost always had in its possession ample early intelligence that, given a different analytical approach and mindset, would have enabled the possibility of setting up a defense or counterintelligence operation.⁴³ And while Intelligence Studies as a discipline has not viewed the rise of al-Qaida in the 1990s from this perspective, it seems rather powerful in explaining why the relevance of so much was simply ignored: the first 1993 attack; the official UBL declaration of war against the United States in the mid-1990s; and the FBI’s failure to follow-up on reports about Arab men taking flight school in America without showing any interest in learning how to land jumbo jets in the simulators in 2000. That intelligence was not missed: Cognitive closure brought on by over-reliance on a grand strategic cultural concept that America was immune to domestic attack from abroad caused that intelligence to be de-prioritized.

The conflict in Ukraine today is still massively misconstrued and misinformed in the West. Once again, over-reliance on grand strategic culture pushes the problem. Fascinatingly, it shows how quickly it can lead an analyst down odd paths. First, grand strategic culture made those in the West believe there could never be conflict between Ukraine and Russia. After all, Russia cites its own cultural beginning from the Kievan Rus. But once the conflict in Eastern Ukraine began in earnest, grand strategic cultural thinking quickly discarded

⁴³ Thomas H. Hammond, “Why is the Intelligence Community so Difficult to Redesign? Smart Practices, Conflicting Goals, and the Creation of Purpose-Based Organizations,” *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 20/3 (2007) p.419.

this original doubt and moved on to embrace the next version: One that assumed Russian aspiration for re-establishing empire (whatever that actually means has never been defined of course). So, grand strategic culture first could not predict the conflict's emergence and then did not do a good job at explicitly defining the purpose behind the conflict being prolonged.

When utilizing an organizational cultural approach for intelligence, however, one is forced to look more carefully at the economic, political, and military agreements that were *already in place and meant to be enforced* when the Maidan revolution took place in Kiev and forced the Ukrainian President to flee. Focusing on the aftermath of that removal and the consequences to those micro-realities goes much farther in explaining how the conflict proceeded to Crimea and across Eastern Ukraine. The failure of the West to understand this or to continue to push a 'grand strategic cultural analysis' actually forces recalcitrance and indignation from the Russian side. This is damning evidence of how grand strategic culture within Intelligence Studies today can force analysts to think in limited, stereotypical, and highly polarizing ways, thereby producing intelligence product that does not help decision-makers but may actually exacerbate a conflict situation. Worse still, in both of the examples above, the scholarly community tends to mimic this practitioner foible. As a result, an echo chamber of sorts develops where the academic community and intelligence community, professor and practitioner, do not spur new ideas or challenge orthodoxies but simply reinforce the status quo analytical mantra. Instead of each side being something of a loose check and balance, they end up more often simply pushing forward and reinforcing tired clichés as in-depth analysis.

This piece started with a call for a Deschian intervention in Intelligence Studies because of the discipline's failure to notice some of its own analytical missteps when evaluating foreign intelligence community agencies. It also suffered from an apparent lack of initiative to differentiate itself more fully from Security Studies. The idea of developing an approach more akin to corporate organizational culture, focusing on purpose-driven, complex, dynamic reality, and allowing intelligence communities to adapt and change needs to be pushed more to the forefront. This approach brings to Intelligence Studies not only more accurate research but gives practitioners better end-products. It also begins to set a separate analytical space apart from Security Studies. This differentiation would be good for both disciplines and would make Intelligence Studies more readily seen as a distinct and fully-developed academic discipline. This win-win would be most welcome not just

in the ivory tower for intelligence but in the real-world when it comes to ameliorating conflict.