

CONVERSATIONS ON STRATEGY

PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

Andrew Scobell and Larry Kuznar Exploring Strategic Culture

This episode delves into the concept of strategic culture and how it influences international relations, military strategy, and deterrence, particularly between the United States, China, and Russia. Dr. Scobell and Dr. Kuznar share insights from their extensive research and highlight the nuances of strategic culture in peacetime, crisis, and conflict scenarios.

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E-mail usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil to give feedback on this podcast.

Stephanie Crider (Host)

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I'm talking with Drs. Andrew Scobell and Larry Kuznar today.

Scobell is the distinguished fellow with the China Program at the US Institute of Peace and is the editor of *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, which was published by the National Defense University Press in 2022. He's also an editorial board member for *Parameters*, the US Army War College Press quarterly.

Kuznar is director of cultural sciences at NSI Incorporated and emeritus professor of anthropology from Purdue University, Fort Wayne, Indiana. His field research is in tribal warfare and root causes of conflict. One of his recent publications is *21st Century Information Environment Trends out to 2040*. He wrote it for NATO's open publications in 2023. He spent the past year researching the relevance of strategic culture and deterrence for the Joint Staff.

Our topic of discussion is strategic culture.

Welcome to Conversations on Strategy. Thank you for joining me.

Larry Kuznar

Thanks for having me.

Andrew Scobell

Good to be here.

Host

What is strategic culture?

Kuznar

We did a study for the Joint Staff in which we did an extensive literature review, including Dr. Scobell's excellent work, and we came up with a definition of strategic culture—an amalgam of all of the 20 or so definitions that we encountered. There's a lot of debate over just how it should be defined, so this is not conclusive. But, just to offer it for the listening audience and, perhaps, for Andrew's comment and, I quote, "An actor's strategic culture is composed of beliefs, experiences, assumptions, attitudes, and patterned behaviors (as we'll see, that's the sticking point for a lot of people) that shape perceptions and preferences about its security-related interests, objectives, and activities."



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Host

Do you agree, Andrew?

Scobell

No, that sounds like a good one to me. I tend to riff off Iain Johnston's definition. One more thing to add is that, I think I say this in my SSI (Strategic Studies Institute) monograph of 2002 titled *China and Strategic Culture*, is really, that's the academic definition. And, it's important because Larry and I are recovering academics, but it's important to be precise about these things. But, I think in layman's terms, strategic culture is the impact of culture on strategy. But, I think it's very consistent with the definition you just gave.

Kuznar

Yes, I agree entirely. Being more an Iain Johnston kind of a perspective, how do you feel about including pattern behaviors in a definition of strategic culture because I know that's a big issue for him.

Scobell

A) I think it's widely considered important, but it's also controversial because, especially for academics, IR (international relations) scholars, you know, they tend to be quite dismissive of culture. It's seen as sort of a hard-to-measure, imprecise, fuzzy, residual category. Anything that we can't readily explain or understand, we just say, "Oh, that's culture."

Analysis is not my forte. I think the best analysis of any problem has a mixture of quantitative and qualitative analyses. So, culture is viewed with suspicion, skepticism, or even derision by a lot of political scientists. By comparison, anthropologists like Larry, I think, have a much greater appreciation for the importance and relevance of culture. In comparison to so-called academics, I think members of the national security established members of the military are more willing to accept the culture as a variable because I think any member of the US military recognizes that there is a culture to the military, and the Army has a different culture to the Navy, et cetera, et cetera.

I think the audiences that I've engaged with over the years tend to be more receptive to the relevance and importance of culture.

Kuznar

To reinforce that, in this recent study that we did, we found great reception for strategic culture and a willingness to really dive in with the combatant commands that we've been talking to.

Host

How do we know strategic culture actually causes anything?

Scobell

It's difficult to quantify, difficult to measure, and it's hard to conclusively identify a causal relationship or linkage. It's a great definition that Larry outlined. Maybe I'll throw it back to him. How do you operationalize that definition?

Kuznar

That's a great question. I think it's the key question. You referenced Johnston's work because he was very influential in pointing out how difficult and problematic it is in the first place. For my part, I think it is possible, but it's going to be very difficult and you've got to be very, very careful about how you do it. I look at culture in general and strategic culture, in particular, as a complex system. So, everything does have the potential to cause everything else. However, empirically, that's not necessarily going to be the case.

There is the excellent 2006 study that involved a bunch of different experts in academics, and they identified four key variables—identity, values, norms, and perceptions. And, if we take those as four variables, as they suggest, potentially, they can all cause one another, but it might not necessarily be the case. For instance, in the case of Russia,

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I would argue that identity, especially the Orthodox identity that had a florescence since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the notion of Greater Russia, those are identity things, and they very much seem to be tied up with the values that are so important for Putin today and Russian decisionmakers, such as nationalism and conservative values that also are spreading. And then, there's other enduring ways of war that seem to be typical of a society. Something that a lot of people pointed out over the years for Russia [is] the tendency to use mass attack and to have an indifference to casualties, more so than others.

Those are reasons that I think we can untangle the knot, if you will, of strategic culture and start to pull on causal linkages. And then, in other places, where we don't have the causal linkages, now we start to see the real character of the strategic culture of a particular society and how it, therefore, might be related to its strategic behaviors.

Scobell

My two cents is it's hard to measure strategic culture or quantify it, but in the minds of political and military leaders, and in the minds of US political and military leaders, they're pretty convinced that the other side, each other, are different. So, this idea of mirror imaging is a bit off the mark because I think both sides see each other, or even assume each other, as different. Now, whether that's the reality, but the assumption on both sides is different, belies this idea of mirror imaging. I'm not saying mirror imaging is not a factor, but I think whether you're in Washington or Beijing or, for that matter, in Moscow, you tend to assume that leaders in other capitals think about these things differently than you do.

Kuznar

I wholeheartedly agree. Any international relations or—especially if it was more national security pragmatically oriented—or intelligence textbook I've ever seen, has something about “thou shalt not mirror image.” And yet, decisionmakers do it all the time.

I think it's because we're in a twenty-first-century environment that's increasingly multipolar, where it's necessary to understand not just an other, like we devoted such resources in the Cold War to understanding Russia. Now, we've got a bunch of others that we must understand. And, I think we're finding in our policy and operations difficulties when we don't do that. And, with respect to deterrence, the integrated deterrence concept includes in it tailored deterrence, which I think people started talking about that a lot around 2006.

One of the key points of tailored deterrence was you need to tailor it to the adversary you want to deter, and that requires understanding how they look at the world.

Scobell

[When it comes to] issues like deterrence, Americans tend to assume that the word deterrence is sort of a universal concept that everybody understands in the same way. I think Dima Adamsky has some interesting work that I haven't looked at lately looking at Russia, that I need to, including Russian understandings of deterrence. But, I think in the Chinese case, my research suggests they think about deterrence in ways that are different to that in the US. So, to get more concrete, whether we talk about tailored deterrence or integrated deterrence, I mean, that's a really important concept for the US national security establishment. The Chinese national security establishment didn't used to use the term deterrence. They do now. But for them, the term deterrence has a significantly different connotation than it does for us. And that is, they see deterrence as something as akin to blackmail and intimidation. Why? Because they see themselves on the other end, being deterred or intimidated or nuclear blackmailed by the United States.

The PLA [People's Liberation Army] now has deterrence as part of its doctrine. As I said, because of their experience countering the US, they see deterrence in a different way. And so, when you're sitting in Washington, you can think coolly, rationally, logically about deterrence and flexible deterrence, tailored deterrence, integrated deterrence, and it seems to make perfect sense. But, if you are the object of that deterrence, like China, you're likely to see

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this in a very different way. And, the roots of the word deterrence scare the bejesus out of someone, so they won't do something.

So, that doesn't sound very intellectual to me. It's very emotive, and perceptually, it's different. How is strategic culture, how does it impact our relationship with China? How similar the same concept is viewed and interpreted, perceived in different ways by different actors.

Host

How can strategic culture be usefully modeled or empirically verified?

Scobell

We've referenced Iain Johnston multiple times. He's written the best book on strategic culture, period, I think—certainly on Chinese strategic culture. You know, his book was published, I think, in 1995, and nothing particularly good or comparable has been written since, including my own book, which deals with strategic culture.

Why is that the case? I think because it's really, really hard to do well.

Kuznar

And, that was part of my comment earlier as to [whether] we can measure strategic culture, but it's going to be really hard, and hard on two levels. One is the kind of theoretical epistemological level, which is what can you even put underneath the umbrella of strategic culture? Like, what truly makes it up? You've got to make the key research decisions there. But then, once you've decided that, personally, I think it is accessible because there's tools such as discourse analysis. You can study people's speeches and see what they emphasize. Do they emphasize them consistently through time? Because that's one of the things about strategic culture. It's allowed to change, but it's supposed to be kind of sticky. So, we can use methodologies like that.

I began my career as an archaeologist. Material culture. What kind of monuments do people revere, et cetera? And what does that say about them? So, I think that it's accessible, but our understandings are going to be, at best, accurate and never precise because it's culture. I'm an anthropologist. We've been arguing over what it is and how to study it for 150 years.

Host

So, we talked a little bit about this already, but I'd like to revisit it, please. How do different strategic cultures impact how the US and China act and interact with each other in peacetime, in crisis, and in wartime?

Scobell

In periods of crisis, mindset thinking changes because you're under pressure. By definition, a crisis involves a sense of urgency and the need to respond very quickly. In that kind of situation, I mentioned earlier that leaders on the other side think differently, but in the moment of crisis, they sort of revert to baseline thinking where they assume the logic of rationality on the other side is the same as theirs. I think we mirror image rationality in situations like that.

Going back to more broadly strategic culture, where China and the US are concerned, I think they think about issues of war and peace differently than we do. And, I don't just say this because I now work at the US Institute of Peace, but what Larry and I were saying, I think, is that we need to look comprehensively, broadly. I think it was back in 2001 or 2002, I wrote a review essay in *Parameters* called, "Is There a Chinese Way of War?" I took the academic way out by saying, on the one hand, this, on the other hand, that. But, I think now it's more important than ever to understand not just whether there's a Chinese approach to war but, more broadly, war and peace.

And so, here's my two cents, Chinese leaders, military and political, tend to think about war and peace as being on a continuum. One far end is all-out war, maybe nuclear Armageddon. The other end is absolute peace. But, the real

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world operates somewhere in between. So, there's the elements of war and peace. And, you know, Xi Jinping, if you look at his speeches, he uses the term "struggle" a heck of a lot. And for him, struggle, or *douzhen*, is both peacetime, wartime. And, I think China's pretty comfortable in the so-called gray zone. By comparison, I think the US, we tend to think about war and peace as being dichotomous. We're either war or peace, or in Pentagon speak, "phase zero." They're fundamentally different ways of looking at war and peace, and I think that has an impact about [how] both sides approach the real world.

Host

Larry, do you have anything to add?

Kuznar

Oh, yeah, I agree entirely. Of course, most of what I know about Chinese strategic culture, I know from Andrew's work, so I'll defer to him. I'm a little more comfortable talking about Russian strategic culture, although, as Andrew pointed out earlier, Dima's work on that is just superlative. I think you're going to find his book really, really interesting.

Scobell

I think that we talk about the impact of Sun Tzu or Confucius on Chinese strategic culture. There's also impact by Mao, but I think that there's a Leninist component to this that may also be relevant in the Russian case. The Russian military are really probably significantly influenced by their Leninist past.

What do you think, Larry?

Kuznar

That's very interesting. I think it probably goes even further back, and it may be more that Lenin is influenced by a deeper tradition of thought in Russia with regard to strategic culture. And, it is the sense of continual struggle, as you said. I mean, their word for information warfare, I believe, translates into information struggle.

The assumption that they operate on is life is a constant struggle, period. End of story. There's no point at which you're going to beat your sword into a plowshare. It's just really always swords. It's just more or less of swords throughout time. And, that's not to say that they're impossibly bellicose and could not be dealt with, but I agree wholeheartedly with Andrew. It's a fundamentally different way of looking at the world, and we do have this dichotomy in the West (and especially the US) where we look for that victory day, and we say, "Okay, mission accomplished. We're done."

And then, we shift our resources into our domestic economy, et cetera. And, it may be one of the reasons for our nation's success, but it also can be a liability when dealing with an adversary who's looking at the world very differently.

Host

What's the potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication?

Scobell

I think it's pretty high, precisely because of these different perspectives. And, as Sun Tzu famously said, "Know your enemy and know yourself." Putting yourself in the other person's shoes, aka empathy, is actually pretty hard to do, especially for great powers like the United States and China. So, both sides, in my view, don't tend to be very good about appreciating the other's perspective.

We did a study at the US Institute of Peace, and it was interesting that both sides pointed the finger at the other for changing the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. The perception on both sides [is] that we're reacting to what you did—it's kind of funny in one sense, but it's a really serious problem because if both sides think that the other side is to blame, that increases the potential for unintended escalation.

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Kuznar

And, I agree with Andrew. I think what happened with the invasion of Ukraine is a great example. We were threatening and actually even doing things to deter Putin, and it did not work. On the nuclear level, maybe we're working there. Things have not escalated to that point. Clearly, we failed to deter the conventional invasion.

I think that's probably what has people very nervous about the Taiwan Strait is are we reading China, and is China reading us, well enough to prevent an escalation that could lead to conflict there?

Host

So, this leads right into what you're talking about—the potential for unintended escalation or accidental conflict. What are some other concerns?

Scobell

I think it's pretty clearly relevant to the Taiwan Strait issue. My personal view is that China's unlikely to attack Taiwan anytime soon. That can change. My view, and most specialists who study the Chinese military, have concluded similarly that China's not preparing to attack Taiwan in the immediate future, i.e. in the next few years. That's not to say it wouldn't happen. The date 2027 has been widely bandied about as the deadline where Xi Jinping has said the PLA is set to invade Taiwan. And, in fact, some senior US officials [were] publicly saying that. Fortunately, people have walked that back. Senior officials have walked that back and explicitly said, no, they don't believe that.

2027, in my view and the view of most specialists, is not a deadline for the unification with Taiwan, but it's more a benchmark or a milestone for Chinese military modernization, just like 2035 is, 2049.

Things can change. And, the message of Ukraine is you've got to constantly monitor the situation. Circumstances change, situations change, and strategic calculus and the mindset of foreign leaders also change.

Kuznar

Something I'd like to add to that [is] part of strategic culture is the fact that different societies—I say societies because we have non-state actors that have their own strategic cultures, I think it's important to remember. But, they have different political cultures. They have different organizations. They are organized differently, and there are internal pressures, as well, that are part of that society's unique way of governing itself. It's very important to realize that because you can have a leader—it could be in a democracy, where you've got pressures coming from the electorate, it could be autocracy, where the dictator needs to maintain control and perception [and] legitimacy in front of his particular constituency that supports him. And, those can be very powerful pressures.

Let's say you've got a leader who's in danger of losing power. That's going to put that individual in a totally different mindset in terms of what risks are worthwhile taking and which are not. And, here in the West, we tend to default to extreme risk aversion. And, maybe it's a luxury of the power position that we've enjoyed all these many, many, many decades.

But, if you have an adversary who is willing to embrace risk, that is going to be a very difficult adversary to deter. And, preventing escalation is going to be very difficult because they may not have anything to lose. Bringing it back to the broader concept of strategic culture, that culture is made up of different sub-political cultures in that society that are exerting their own pressures on the decisionmakers there. It's very important to understand.

Host

Do you have any concluding thoughts to share with us before we go?

Scobell

You know, strategic culture, [I am] trying to think, maybe circling back, we're talking about how can you measure the impact? Larry and I are, I think, in agreement that it has an impact. It is important. And, I think at the strategic

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level, and so, that's strategic culture. But at the operational level, it may have less impact. And, let me read you a really short quote from Mao Zedong from 1938, *Problems of Strategy in the Guerrilla War Against Japan*. Mao says, "All of the guiding principles of military operations grow out of one basic principle, to strive to the utmost to preserve one's own strength and destroy that of the enemy."

Most US military professionals would say, "I agree with that. No argument with that." So, I think thinking about levels of warfare, levels of strategy, or levels of analysis, and where strategic culture is most influential is worth thinking about.

Host

Larry?

Kuznar

I think that strategic culture is essential, and we must devote a lot of attention to it. We need to train our young people to think as people do in other societies [and] become familiar with them because cultural differences between us and our adversaries, and just us and other nations, in general, do persist. There's something there. It is difficult to study, admittedly, but we have to make the effort.

The other thing, though, as Andrew was just saying, [is that] strategic culture is not everything, however. There are very practical things that every society has to contend with. Its ability to use force either to project power or to defend itself is time immemorial, and that introduces, kind of, more Realpolitik considerations that no nation or non-nation, non-state group can ignore.

And then, the final thing, as I was mentioning earlier, there's the issue of what is the political culture internal to the society like? I think, too often we ignore what's happening inside of the society, maybe even attribute more influence that we have on world events because there's things that can drive them internally. So, it's kind of like that triumvirate of political culture of the society, the strategic culture that informs how it approaches strategic matters, and then, the real politics that we all have to deal with every day.

Host

Thank you both so much for making time to speak with me today. I appreciate your time.

Kuznar

Thank you. Glad to meet you, finally, Andrew.

Scobell

Thanks, Larry and Stephanie. I really enjoyed it. It was fun.

Host

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