Antti Seppo

From Guilt
to Responsibility
and Beyond

The Evolution of German Strategic Culture
after the End of the Cold War

Contents

I   Germany and Strategic Culture: The Prophecy of Continuity

In general, strategic culture refers to the ways of thinking about and pursuing security and defence policy. It conveys a picture of how a country's political elite approaches questions of peace and war, in particular the question of the use of military force and the responses that can be found to these questions given the specifics of the national past(s) and lessons learned therefrom. It is important to stress, however, that strategic culture is not some randomly emergent collection of ideas, beliefs and practices but a social and political entity that has developed over time. In global international politics, the issues of peace and war have always been fundamental in terms of not only state survival but also what comes or should come thereafter. Hence, they touch upon the very conditions of sustainable political life that is either possible or desirable in a given historical context. Therefore, the ability of strategic culture to provide answers (which implies that there is a strong normative aspect to strategic culture) is not only connected to the set-up of its inner structure (societally transmitted ideas, beliefs and related practices) but also to its ability to adapt to emerging challenges and security threats. Adaptation, in turn, might require considerable changes in strategic culture, depending on the nature of the external challenges.

This study focuses on the aspect of change in strategic cultures in general and in German strategic culture in particular. It attempts to draw a comprehensive picture of German strategic cultural change after the end of the Cold War by devising an analytical framework that is based on an understanding of strategic cultural change as a causally non-linear process and a synthesis of the arguments on change within strategic cultural studies. This is an important aspect, one which has hitherto been largely ignored in scholarship on strategic culture. By underlining the aspect of nonlinearity in the process of change, this study attempts to go beyond an understanding of strategic cultural change as a fixed, linear and unidimensional process.[1] This is necessary because strategic cultural change and continuity often co-exist to some degree (at least in the *world out there*) and that it is therefore hardly tenable to describe the processes of continuity and change solely in terms of linear causal functions.

---

[1]   Linearity, which in itself is a theoretical construct, can be expressed as a situation where a dependent variable has a linear relationship with one or more independent variables. Thus, linearity can be understood as the linear function of independent variables. An example would be that of a plot following a simple linear structure, which involves ideas and events that are always directly connected and follow one after the other.

In order to be able to grasp strategic cultural change as a causally nonlinear process, this study utilizes critical realist metatheory, particularly the arguments relating to the causal properties/powers of directly unobservable, yet detectable entities.[2] By so doing, the thesis seeks to question the well-established assumptions regarding the theoretical and analytical importance and prevalence of the aspect of strategic cultural continuity in strategic cultures that inevitably lead to a rather static view of strategic culture. It also seeks to offer a better way of looking at strategic cultures as inherently dynamic social and political entities that may draw upon specific socio-cognitive features embedded in the national past(s) and its re-interpretations, exhibiting an important causal role in terms of explaining strategic cultural change. Accordingly, if we accept the notion that strategic cultures are essentially dynamic social and political entities, it can be argued that the principal aim of German strategic culture has been not only to adjust to but also to shape the emerging post-Cold War political reality ever since the fall of the Berlin wall.

The definition of strategic culture used in this study can be outlined as follows: strategic culture consists of specific strategic thinking and strategic practices that establish clarity regarding the potential policy outcomes of questions and choices related to peace and war and the use of military force. Strategic thinking and practices, in turn, are embedded within the normative framework of strategic culture that draws from lessons from the past. In the German case, this framework evolved after the end of World War II and culminated in the lessons of *never again*.[3] It is important to point out, however, that norms do not necessarily determine the outcomes of any strategic culture or policies pursued; they are better understood as *reasons for action*, enabling or constraining the realm of options for political actors in their strategic contemplation.[4]

In terms of methodology, this study proceeds as follows. The overall aim of this study is to contribute to general understanding regarding the concept of strategic culture via theoretical reflection on the existing scholarly debate. Another aim is to reinvigorate the debate on strategic culture by digging deep into the processes of strategic cultural change by introducing an analytical framework that builds on insights from critical realist metatheory and existing accounts on strategic cultural change. This is supported by an analytical empirical analysis on the evolution of German strategic culture since the end of World War II. However, it should be noted that, since the scope of the analysis covers developments that reach from the aftermath of World War II to the conflict in Ukraine, an in-depth analysis of

---

2   For a detailed discussion, see Chapter II.
3   See Chapter III.
4   See Chapter I.3.

each turn of events, debate or related specifics is beyond this thesis. Therefore, the empirical focus is specifically on post-Cold War developments. The thesis provides a rich and varied account in terms of the evolution of German strategic culture by elaborating primarily but not only on the questions of peace and war and the use of military force (the core of strategic culture). Indeed, another purpose of the analysis is to pit the introduced analytical framework against theoretical claims that operate on the level of the international system. Instead of attempting to cover a multitude of theoretical claims that operate at the system level, this thesis focuses especially on Alexander Wendt's account of cultures of anarchy (Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian culture)[5] since it can be argued that it provides interesting contrasts to the theory of strategic culture and can hence be treated either as a critique on some of the claims that this thesis puts forward or as a supplementary account that highlights international and global dynamics in explaining strategic cultural change.

The research proceeds as follows. Chapter I discusses in depth why it is necessary to shift the focus of research from strategic cultural continuity to strategic cultural change. It will delve into the scholarly debates and existing theoretical frameworks on strategic culture and assess their impact on the study of German strategic culture. Chapter II discusses the existing accounts of strategic cultural change and constructs an analytical framework for the study of strategic cultural change. It also discusses Wendtian cultures of anarchy that provide alternative/supplementary accounts in terms of strategic cultural change. Chapters III and IV portray the evolution of German strategic culture since the end World War II and Cold War, respectively. This is provided in the form of an analytical historical narrative that focuses particularly, but not exclusively, on the question of the use of military force and the German debate in terms of so-called out-of-area operations *(Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr).*[6] Chapter V shifts the discussion to re-interpretations of the German past because they play a pivotal role in grasping the essence of strategic cultural change. In Chapter V, the thesis elaborates on and provides a critical analysis of some of the grand schemes or claims on German strategic culture, such as that of a German special path (*Sonderweg*) and the debate on *normality*, because they play an important role in terms of strategic cultural evolution in Germany. It is also suggested in this study that counterfactual argumentation can prove to be useful in not only stressing the aspect of causal nonlinearity instead of linearity in the evolution of strategic culture, but also the inherent contingency in terms of external shocks such as wars, conflicts and

---

5   See A. Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 246−312.

6   Out-of-area operations refer to those military operations conducted under the auspices of collective systems of security of which Germany is a part, such as those of NATO which go beyond the territorial boundaries of the member states of these systems.

crises, which all pose a challenge to strategic cultures. Chapter V concludes with a counterfactual thought experiment on the case of the Srebrenica massacre.

The empirical material used in this study consists mainly of a selection of Bundestag debates in the form of plenary protocols that provide not only a comprehensive picture of the process of how German strategic thought is constructed at the level of the German political elite, but also of how Germans respond to the emerging issues of peace, war and the use of military force in terms of particular Bundeswehr (German armed forces) out-of-area operations. In addition, this study utilizes a wide range of other textual material, defence and security policy related documents such as White Papers (*Weissbuch*) and Defence Political Guidelines (*Verteidigungspolitische Richtlinien*), a wide selection of media and press coverage mainly on the deployment of the Bundeswehr in out-of-area operations but also more widely on security and defence policy. It also utilizes other literary sources and existing research on strategic culture and international relations, security and defence policy.

The argument put forward in this study is that strategic cultural change needs to be grasped in terms of social and political processes, as well as outcomes at the level of policy practices in order to do justice to the complex cultural and social reality. This view allows us to move from an understanding of strategic cultural change in terms of historical evolution that is rooted in essentialism and guided by strict path-dependency to an understanding of strategic cultural change as a causally non-linear process which may become empirically observable as verifiable outcomes, such as in terms of institutionalized patterns of behaviour. Perhaps more importantly, this thesis also suggests that the debate on strategic cultural change needs to go beyond the notion of observable, verifiable outcomes because strategic cultures possess significant socio-cognitive qualities that do not always become empirically observable in the way we might expect.[7]

As will be discussed in detail in the empirical analysis, in the German case this pertains particularly to the process of coming to terms with the German past and the evolving perceptions thereof, the understanding of which is imperative if we want to understand and explain the changes that took place in German strategic culture after the end of the Cold War.

---

7   This is not to say that processes are essentially unobservable (which they are not) but merely to highlight the fact that research on strategic culture needs to shift its focus from clearly observable and detectable outcomes to entities such as processes which may not always become empirically manifest to the degree that outcomes do. According to Heikki Patomäki, what is observable and what is not is essentially a complex and relative question. For more on observation, see, eg, H. Patomäki, 'On the Reality of Causes: A Response to Ned Lebow', Qualitative & Multi-Method Research, vol. 12, no. 2, 2014, pp. 11–16.

However, the importance of studying the aspect of change in strategic cultures should not be underestimated from either a more policy-oriented view, or from a popular view, for that matter. For instance, the changes within the US strategic culture that led to the war against terrorism during the Bush administration in the early 2000s have had a considerable impact not only on the functioning of NATO and the transatlantic community but also on the way how individuals and peoples contemplate the issues of peace and war and the use of military force. This is so irrespective of how these changes were evaluated within the research community. Hence, by attempting a systematic look at the process of strategic cultural change, we might be in a better position to understand how and why we wage war against terrorism the way we do. Similarly, an in-depth look at the process of change in German strategic culture not only provides us with an account of why and how German strategic culture has changed, but also of why Germany might often seem reluctant to take the lead in terms of issues regarding international security (for instance). Hence, the observations we draw from studying the process of strategic cultural change can have important social and political implications that go beyond the notion of interest shown among the professional circles in the field of International Relations (IR).

1 The Initial Theoretical Premise: German Strategic Culture as a Culture of Strategic Continuity

In his seminal work on German and Japanese post-World War II foreign and security policy cultures, Thomas U. Berger admits that he was surprised that Germany and Japan had not begun to act more assertively in military terms since the end of the Cold War. He claims this was contrary to all the expectations of students of international relations and claims to have had trouble in facing an empirical reality in such disarray and at odds with his theoretical premises: "I felt like Sherlock Holmes in the Hound of Baskervilles: The puzzle was not that the dog barked, but rather that it did not."[8] Berger was not alone in his bafflement. Indeed, this seemed to be one of the more perplexing topics among the observers of German politics after the end of the Cold War: why did Germany not choose to act more aggressively?[9] Berger argued that this was because of a deeply rooted anti-militarism and pacifism

---

8   T. Berger, Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, (Preface).

9   This seemed to be a question particularly bothering the realist camp of IR scholars, see J. Duffield, World Power Forsaken. Political Culture, International Institutions and German Security Policy After Unification, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998; K. Waltz, 'The