

Alastair Iain Johnston, "Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China," in Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 216-68.

I. Neo-Realism vs. Strategic Culture Overview

- A. Constructivists have tended to focus on non-realpolitik behavior in IR, ceding the turf of realpolitik foreign policy to realists. Research on strategic culture raises the possibility of explaining realpolitik foreign policy with ideational variables.
- B. The realist response to strategic culture arguments is to say that such culture is epiphenomenal, a product of the logic of anarchy. The realists' arguments in this respect rest on three problematic claims, however:
 - 1. Only non-realpolitik behavior can be ideational in origin.
 - 2. Realist theory makes determinate predictions without ideational variables.
 - 3. Realpolitik ideology is epiphenomenal.
- C. An analysis of the Chinese case challenges these claims, or at least shows that they are too weak to dismiss strategic culture as an explanation for realpolitik behavior.

II. The Choice of China as a Test of Strategic Culture

- A. China has traditionally been viewed as having a non-Realist strategic culture, but this characterization misses the mark.
- B. There are actually two distinct traditions in Chinese strategic thought: a Confucian-Mencian paradigm that stresses non-violent accommodationist strategies, and a parabellum or hard realpolitik paradigm that stresses sensitivity to changes in relative capabilities and offensive uses of force.
- C. The parabellum paradigm has been the dominant discourse in Chinese history, while the Confucian-Mencian approach is vague about certain key strategic issues and often dismissed in the dominant discourse as relevant only to the ancient past.

III. Conceptual and Methodological Approach

- A. First define strategic culture in a way that is falsifiable. It is defined here as consisting of two parts:
 - 1. Basic assumptions about the orderliness of the strategic environment (is war aberrant or normal? does the nature of the adversary make conflicts zero-sum or variable-sum? how effective is the use of force?)
 - 2. Operational ideas that apply the basic assumptions to the threat environment and result in ranked preferences for grand strategy (are offensive, defensive, or accommodationist strategies most appropriate?)
 - 3. The development of ranked strategic preferences is key so that the culture is falsifiable – if these preferences change over time, a consistent strategic culture cannot be said to exist.
- B. Test for strategic culture in the formulative texts of a certain country – in China's case the *Seven Military Classics* is the obvious choice. Using these texts, the researcher can develop cognitive maps that indicate how the writer thinks foreign policy goals should be pursued.

- C. Test for the influence of strategic culture on behavior as compared to other explanations.

IV. The Maoist Paradigm: Johnston investigates a collection of key writings from Mao that span his career to develop insight into his strategic thinking.

- A. The Nature of Conflict: Mao did not just see conflict as inevitable but desirable – it was the process through which history moved forward and contradictions were resolved. He came to this view even before accepting Marxist-Leninist arguments on class conflict.
- B. The Nature of the Adversary: Mao had a complicated conception here, dividing contradictions into antagonistic and non-antagonistic (the latter did not require elimination but rather transformation -- though political education, for example). There were also primary and secondary contradictions – the latter could be temporarily subordinated to the former. In any case, Mao appeared to believe that at some point contradictions between two adversaries would become primary and antagonistic, and thus enter a zero-sum universe.
- C. The Role of Violence: Mao clearly endorsed the use of force as an approach to resolving contradictions. Looking at a number of specific writings, Johnston picks out a few key themes:
 - 1. Military force is almost always required to solve security problems.
 - 2. Offensive uses of force are the key to victory; defense is just a temporary stage and inadequate for victory.
 - 3. Relative material power is the key to military victory.
- D. Johnston concludes that the Maoist paradigm fits comfortably within the parabellum tradition described above. It is difficult to disentangle the influence of traditional Chinese strategic culture on Mao from Clauswitzian and Leninist thinking, both of which could also account for such ideas, but it appears Mao was exposed to traditional Chinese thinking at an earlier age.

V. Strategic Preference Rankings – Mao believed offense was critical to eventual victory, though he did not necessarily favor first strikes (inasmuch as they could arouse sympathy for the opponent elsewhere and tar China with the label “aggressor”). In general, Mao’s writings lead one to expect:

- A. Framing of the use of force as defensive and just
- B. Use of force would be initiated after it appeared to Chinese leaders that conflict was imminent
- C. Once conflict appeared to be imminent, Chinese leaders would be expected to see it as zero-sum, prompting quick escalation to wider conflict
- D. Chinese use of force should be related to changes in relative capabilities – shifts in relative capabilities in China’s favor should precede the use of force.

VI. Actual Chinese conflict behavior since 1949 appears to be consistent with the preference rankings above

- A. China has been more likely than other powers to use force in foreign policy crises in proportional terms (used force in 8 of 11 cases 1949-85).

- B. China was more likely to use force in territorial disputes than other powers, suggesting a more zero-sum orientation. China also seemed more likely to view diplomatic/political conflicts in zero-sum terms as well (although there were only 3 such cases, China used force in two of them (i.e. 67%) -- the percentage for all other actors was 18 percent)
- C. China was quite willing to initiate the use of force in its disputes. Of the 8 cases in which China resorted to force, China initiated the use of force in 5 of them.
- D. China has been sensitive to changing relative capabilities in a conflict in a way that accords with the views described above. Using rough estimates of national power, a shift in power in China's favor in a given year appears to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for China to initiate conflict with an adversary in the following year.

VII. Conclusions and Problems of Analysis

- A. China's strategic tradition does not differ markedly from the Western realpolitik tradition
- B. China's strategic culture appears to be more than "a trivial variable in the analysis of Chinese strategic behavior." There is a deeply rooted consistent set of assumptions about security strategy in China, and these assumptions have persisted across many different state systems in Chinese history.
- C. One problem of analysis is that China's strategic culture generates similar predictions about Chinese behavior compared to "offensive" realism, which leads to charges that strategic culture is merely epiphenomenal. There are two ways of dealing with this problem:
 1. Set up a critical test in which predictions of strategic culture and neo-Realism diverge (this is difficult to do since the strategic culture has not varied much)
 2. Conduct cross-national studies -- i.e. does non-realpolitik strategic culture in other countries lead to non-realist behavior? Johnston argues it does in the case of democratic security communities.
 3. Johnston argues that realism has difficulty explaining the behavior of Chinese empires at their peak. While anarchy was still present at such times, presumably the fear that anarchy breeds was attenuated then. So the tenacity with which Ming China pursued the Mongol threat when the disparity in power meant that it could have been easily ignored or bought off suggests that factors other than realist considerations were at work.
- D. Structural realpolitik can be subsumed within the cultural realpolitik model -- in the presence of a realpolitik strategic culture, one would expect the predictions of structural realists to be on target. In a way, cultural realpolitik saves the structural version from the problem that its assumptions about the way states view the world may be wrong.
- E. This suggests that ideas and structure are not necessarily competing explanations but rather can be part of the same theory. There are three ways in which ideas and structure can be related:

1. Structure produces determinate predictions about behavior, but actual behavior is often skewed because of cultural factors.
2. Structure produces indeterminate predictions about behavior, but does limit the possibilities -- specific behavior is chosen from among these as a function of ideational variables.
3. Structure is given meaning by cultural factors -- it is seen as anarchical if the strategic ideology at work is realpolitik, or institutionalized if the ideology is idealpolitik.

General Comments:

Is it easier for a country for cultural reasons adopt a consistently hard realpolitik approach than an idealpolitik one? Ming China did not pay much of a price for being paranoid about weak barbarians, but republican China might have been even worse off if it had taken an idealpolitik approach toward Japan in the 1930s. One other hand, you could argue that realpolitik strategic culture leads a country to create conflict where none was necessary.

How special a case is China? Perhaps other countries with shorter histories and more multicultural populations would exhibit less coherent strategic cultures. The US would seem like an interesting case to test in this regard.

What does learning have to say about strategic culture? The Reiter article shows that countries can abandon a certain strategic approach relatively quickly if it was shown to be unsuccessful for that country in the last war. What does this imply for the durability of strategic culture? Has China's historical experience consistently reaffirmed the value of its strategic culture?

Did Mao really believe that the distribution of relative material capabilities vis-à-vis the US favored China in 1950? Is the Chinese intervention in Korea -- which was pushed by Mao in particular -- really consistent with the ideas that were attributed to him in this chapter? In the end, of course, Mao's calculation that China could go head-to-head with the US in Korea was correct.