National Defence University
Department of Warfare
Series 2: Research Reports No. 40

European Manual on Strategic Culture

Tommi Koivula & Antti Seppo

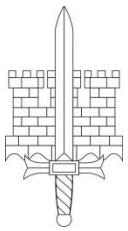


MAANPUOLUSTUSKORKEAKOULU
SOTATAIDON LAITOS
JULKAISUSARJA 2: TUTKIMUSSELOSTEITA NRO 40

NATIONAL DEFENCE UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF WARFARE
SERIES 2: RESEARCH REPORTS NO. 40

EUROPEAN MANUAL ON STRATEGIC CULTURE

Tommi Koivula and Antti Seppo



NATIONAL DEFENCE UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF WARFARE
HELSINKI 2026

Tommi Koivula & Antti Seppo: *European Manual on Strategic Culture*
Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu
Sotataidon laitos
Julkaisusarja 2: Tutkimusselosteita nro 40
National Defence University
Department of Warfare
Series 2: Research Reports No. 40

STRAX

Recent publications in PDF format: *http://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/73990*

© Authors & FNDU

ISBN 978-951-25-3596-5 (Pbk.)
ISBN 978-951-25-3597-2 (PDF)
ISSN 2343-5275 (print)
ISSN 2343-5283 (online)

Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu – Sotataidon laitos
National Defence University – Department of Warfare



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0 International License. To view a copy of the CC BY-NC 4.0 license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.en

PunaMusta Oy
Joensuu 2026
Finland

Acknowledgements

This manual is the product of discussions and drafting taking place during the past three years. It has been written in the context of research project STRAX (*Transforming strategic cultures in contemporary Europe: Towards an understanding of reasons, intermediaries and processes of change*), funded by the Research Council of Finland.

We are especially indebted to STRAX team members Hanna Ojanen, Niklas Helwig, Katariina Mustasilta and Anton Staffans for their insights and encouragement during the writing process. We have also benefited greatly from collaboration with members of the STRAX advisory board.

We also have received invaluable advice from commentators at academic conferences, and at STRAX workshops. We want to especially extend our thanks to participants of the Defence Policy Workshop at the Finnish National Defence University in 2025 for insightful discussion on the Manual.

Susanna Kaulanen from Marker Wizards Ltd. has contributed to the manual's accessibility with playful illustrations. Our intern Onni-Pekka Lipponen has kindly completed a language review on the manuscript.

Keywords: Europe, strategic culture, military education, defense, co-operation

Contents

Acknowledgements ..... **i**

1. Purpose of this Manual **1**

1.1. Importance of Strategic Cultural Awareness for Security Policy Practitioners 1

1.2. For Whom this Manual is intended 1

1.3. How to use this Manual 3

2. Strategic Culture – What is it? **5**

2.1. Working Definition of Strategic Culture 5

2.2. Culturally Sensitive Approach 5

2.3. Manifestations of Strategic Culture 7

2.4. Continuity and Change in Strategic Culture 8

2.5. Importance of Strategic Subcultures 11

3. How Strategic Culture Manifests in European Security **14**

3.1. Policy Planning 14

3.2. Military-industrial Cooperation 15

3.3. Military Education 16

3.4. Operations 17

3.5. Is Strategic Culture an Enabler or a Constraint? 19

Conclusion: Recommendations for Practitioners **21**

Sources **22**

Further reading **23**

1. Purpose of this Manual

1.1. Importance of Strategic Cultural Awareness for Security Policy Practitioners

Welcome to the manual of strategic culture! We are pleased that you took the time to familiarize yourself with its contents and hope that you'll see the benefits of this in your daily work.

As the authors, we firmly believe that the capacity to identify and assess the characteristics and potential implications of strategic culture on national security behavior constitutes a core professional qualification of contemporary military officers, defense policy experts and decision-makers. Beyond mere awareness of the cultural dimensions of security, the ability to operate effectively within a strategic cultural environment is rapidly becoming an essential component of professional expertise in the field of security and defense policy.

Strategic culture is fundamentally something that needs to be experienced, either through engagement in the field, reflection or rigorous analysis. An interest and curiosity toward how strategic views may differ is a good starting point. Conversely, the realization that we tend to think we are special in this regard may guide us out of our strategic cultural "blind spots" and biases.

This concise manual is intended to help readers understand and navigate the complex socio-political environment shaped by strategic culture, particularly within European security and defense. It aims to illustrate how strategic culture can affect the ways in which professionals working in the field of strategy – such as within the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy – identify shared perspectives and differences, address challenges arising from diverse strategic cultures, and foster common ground across varying issues.

1.2. For Whom this Manual is intended

The manual is founded on the assumption that cultural awareness enables individuals to navigate the realm of strategic culture and to manage the challenges, frictions, and demands arising from cultural variance within and between different nations and actors. At the same time, it highlights how efforts to understand strategic issues from a cultural perspective can generate valuable insights and opportunities for action. Viewing strategy through a cultural lens requires sensitivity to how cultural attributes shape conceptions of war, peace, and the use of military force, influencing the ways in which different actors formulate and implement strategy.[1]

[1] This manual is written as part of research project STRAX (Transforming strategic cultures in contemporary Europe: Towards an understanding of reasons, intermediaries and processes of change), funded by the Research Council of Finland.

While this manual is open to all readers, it is primarily intended for those engaged with broad strategic questions in the field of European security cooperation. In particular, we hope that military officers and civilian officials working on civil-military cooperation – at the intersection of political and military decision-making and action – will find this manual a valuable resource.

For **military officers,** this includes those who "lead military formations and structures, provide advice to and support higher-level commanders/civilian authorities in planning and conducting joint operations at operational and strategic levels, serve as staff at joint multinational headquarters and function as primary advisers to general officers/civilian equivalent in strategic decision and policy making"[2] that is, professionals operating at the intersection of political and military matters.

The manual is also designed to support those working in joint or multi- service environments, particularly at the operational level. This includes officers who lead military units and formations, advise and assist senior commanders in planning and conducting joint operations at higher tactical and operational levels, provide logistical support, conduct or supervise training, ensure troop welfare, and oversee administrative and equipment management functions.[3] In other words, it is aimed at professionals responsible for translating political goals into military strategy and military strategy into operational action.

In addition to military officers, the manual is intended to support **civilian officials and experts** engaged in policy-making on strategic matters and in civil-military cooperation, whether at the national level or within EU structures. Such roles typically span defense ministries and other governmental branches and may include positions such as counsellor, adviser, specialist, or desk officer, among others.

Thus, the manual operates at the strategic level, focusing on international interaction between nations, their defense administrations, and armed forces. It is within these interactions that the practical value of understanding strategic cultural concepts and practices becomes most apparent. Knowledge on strategic culture can serve as a valuable analytical tool, enabling practitioners to gain insights into, or filter, national biases or cultural nuances regarding war, peace, and the use of military force – whether when translating policy into strategy or working within civilian-military settings.

[2] Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Military Officer Profession, SQF-MILOFt, VOL1, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, p. 23.
[3] Ibid.

1.3. How to use this Manual

Strategic culture is inherently abstract, which can make it occasionally challenging to grasp. To ensure its relevance to practitioners, we dissect this abstract nature of strategic culture into understandable, consumable bits of useful information and knowledge as well as some practical dos and don'ts.

This manual assumes no prior knowledge of the concept. Since strategic cultures are seldom monolithic or clearly delineated socio-political entities, readers are encouraged to approach questions of strategic culture with an open and inquisitive mindset.

The manual does not advocate any particular scholarly view on strategic culture; rather, it aims to highlight the practical value of various approaches for military personnel and civilian officials. It provides both conceptual frameworks and practical tools to enhance understanding of strategic culture and its influence on the daily operations of European security and defense cooperation.



Figure 1. Strategic culture is inherently abstract, which can make it occasionally challenging to grasp.

The manual is intentionally concise, and readers are encouraged to engage with it in its entirety. It includes information boxes offering additional insights on key topics, and a section on further reading at the end is provided for those wishing to explore the subject in greater depth.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Cultural awareness helps practitioners navigate strategic culture and manage challenges arising from cultural differences.
- Understanding strategy through a cultural lens offers valuable insights into how different actors view war, peace, and military force.
- At the strategic level, knowledge of strategic culture helps practitioners interpret national biases and cultural nuances in defense and security interactions.
- The manual does not promote a single academic theory but highlights the practical value of multiple approaches for military and civilian practitioners.
- It offers conceptual frameworks and practical tools to understand strategic culture's influence on European security and defense cooperation.

2. Strategic Culture – What is it?

2.1. Working Definition of Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is a theory-based analytical tool for understanding – and, at times explaining, the strategic thinking and behavior of states. In essence, it concerns the patterns of thinking and modes of action concerning war, peace, and the use of military force. Sometimes strategic culture is applied more broadly. For instance, it can illuminate how civil-military relations, alliance politics and threat images emerge and how they are interpreted through culturally embedded lenses. A useful metaphor for strategic culture is that of a window: by looking through it one can observe how and why others think and act strategically as they do. At the same time, the window reflects one's own assumptions, revealing how personal or national perspectives shape the interpretation of others' strategic behavior and how these insights are reconciled with one's own ways of thinking and acting. Ideally, familiarity with the strategic cultures of others fosters a process of learning and reflection, thereby enhancing the capacity to formulate and implement better strategies in an increasingly complex security environment.

2.2. Culturally Sensitive Approach

Although the concept of strategic culture emerged in the 1970s, factors such as geography, demography, and various traditions have long influenced the behavior of states and other political entities. Consequently, similar ideas and concepts – such as national security culture – have been employed over the centuries to characterize enduring national patterns in security issues.

Today, the national strategic cultures of the EU member states differ according to their respective histories, cultural heritages, geographical positions, and the experiences shaped by these factors.[4] Strategic cultures may thus be understood as interpretive windows through which one can observe how historical trajectories and inherited traditions inform states' approaches to questions of war, peace, and the use of military force.

For example, strategic cultures are inclined to manage the prospect of insecurity in different ways. This is true not only in the context of modern strategic competition among great nuclear powers, but also throughout the recorded history of nations' strategic behavior. According to the Athenian historian Thucydides, the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) began because Sparta feared the rise of Athenian power and considered war a preferable alternative to the continued growth of Athens. In turn, Athens believed that if it conceded to Sparta's

[4] Strategic Culture: an elusive but necessary foundation for EU security and defence? A report based on an online seminar co-organised by the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie (DGRIS), French Ministry for the Armed Forces, on 18 June 2021.

relatively modest demands, the Spartans would eventually enslave them. Although there was no immediate threat to Athens, it launched an expedition to Sicily to pre-emptively curb Syracuse's potential growth, fearing that Syracuse might one day ally with Sparta against Athens.

Thus, even though the concept of strategic culture was unknown at the time, the tendency to use military force pre-emptively may be a timeless characteristic of certain great powers. The reasoning behind these strategies can be attributed to the propensity of Greek strategic cultures toward pre-emptive strikes, despite Sparta's preference for land-based military operations and Athens' emphasis on naval power.

Strategic cultural traits can also be used to evaluate the likely actions of potential adversaries–specifically, what they might do or how they might act or react in a given situation. This approach was employed in early strategic cultural studies during the Cold War, which aimed to infer potential Soviet responses to a hypothetical U.S. nuclear strike based on the broader cultural traits of Soviet political elites.[5]

Equally, questions of strategic culture – or differing national cultures – become particularly salient when representatives of various nations work together. Whether in exercises, international operations, national procedures, or positions on various issues, differing national approaches are likely to surface. For example, the meeting rooms in NATO represent 32 different strategic cultures. Accommodating these differences or finding a common approach is not always easy.

In military organizations, questions of international security are often, either explicitly or intuitively, viewed through the philosophical and analytical lenses of political realism, or, alternatively, power politics – terms that refer to the same school of thought. While there are many variations in political realism, its core tenets include the idea that world politics is an ongoing competition among self-interested states, each pursuing security and self-preservation in an anarchic environment. Political realism emphasizes the role of military force and regards war as a recurring phenomenon in international relations.

However, while realism may provide an overarching worldview for those working in military organizations, it operates at too general a level to effectively address the day-to-day issues faced by people working with strategic questions.

Political realism is a powerful explanatory paradigm for international relations, but it fails to illuminate the nuances in the motivations and intentions of leaders and communities, nor does it offer insights into the role that identity, values, norms, and cognitive processes play in shaping behaviors, policies, and outcomes. Strategic culture can complement realism by providing such context and

[5] Snyder, Jack L. 1977: The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations. A Project AIR FORCE Report prepared for the United States Air Force. Santa Monica: Rand.

awareness.[6] Its added value lies precisely in recognizing that states' strategic actions cannot always be reduced to a realist logic – states do, in fact, think and act differently when confronted with the same security dilemmas.

Indeed, it is important to recognize that strategic culture operates on multiple levels. When examining strategic interactions between states, strategic cultural frameworks are particularly valuable in cases where the unitary, rationalist logic of using military power to achieve one's objectives fails to explain the differences in states' strategic actions. When we are puzzled by why a state chose a particular strategic action over what seemed like a more logical course of action, understanding how different political parties or elites evaluate various strategic cultural ideas or norms and how they interpret historical events within that state, can be helpful. This is because these evaluations and perspectives reflect the strategic cultural context in which decisions for strategic action are made.

2.3. Manifestations of Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is often a **tacit** factor in everyday policy-making. It is rarely documented, yet it can be observed in national, organizational, or even individual behavior. It is something we frequently take for granted. For instance, decision-makers in some nations may be more inclined to use military force as a tool promote their foreign policy goals, while others may adopt a more reserved stance to it. We can better understand these differences by examining them through the lens of strategic culture.

The strategic culture of a given country can also be seen as influencing its grand strategy decision-making, and balancing international pressures and policies at the grand strategic level.[7] In practice, this means that strategic culture acts as a kind of a **cultural filter** between external pressures and strategies pursued – it helps align a country's strategies with both internal and external needs and requirements.

On the other hand, strategic culture can also be an **emphasized goal** or **end state**. A common European strategic culture is something that may be called for in Pan-European political statements, such as the European Union's *Strategic Compass* (2022), which sets as its goal "helping the member states to build a common strategic culture, strengthen their unity and solidarity and, above all, enhance their capacity and willingness to act together, to protect their interests and defend their values."[8]

---

[6] Kartchner, Kerry M., Briana D. Bowen & Jeannie L. Johnson (eds.): *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture*, Routledge, 2024, p. 28.

[7] Cf. Lin, Leo: Strategic Subcultures and Grand Strategy Formation: A Neoclassical Realist View. Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies (RAIS), June 2020.

[8] A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security, Brussels, 21 March 2022, p. 6.

There exists a diverse and widespread academic literature on the concept. The literature section of this manual will help you familiarize yourself with this evolving academic debate.

Below, however, are a few common discussion themes that will help you better assess the ways in which strategic culture may manifest in European security and defense.

2.4. Continuity and Change in Strategic Culture

Every culture requires some form of continuity in its patterns to be considered a "culture". Otherwise, we would be discussing a collection of diverse and disconnected values, norms and ideas on war, peace, and the use of military force. The same holds true for strategic culture. Many strategic cultures around the world have evolved over centuries and are deeply rooted, while others may be relatively new or in their formative stages. Nation-states typically possess strong and well-established strategic cultures, whereas international organizations or even terrorist groups may display more volatile and fragmented strategic cultural patterns.

In academic literature, there is often a tendency to view strategic cultures as resistant to change. However, this assessment may be premature. Strategic cultures typically face increased pressure to adapt when the external security environment shifts, and existing policies no longer achieve the intended objectives as they once did. This, in turn, necessitates strategic cultural deliberation and potential adjustments in policy priorities or even entire policy shifts. A case in point is the geopolitical upheaval in Europe following Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. EU member states were compelled to adapt strategically to this new reality, which for many involved at least a reorientation or a shift in their strategic preferences, alliance patterns, views on peace and war, and the use of military force. Drivers for strategic cultural change can be detected for example in generational shifts, growing civil-military partnerships, intensifying debates on collective defense and strategic autonomy as well as academic research, which has gained considerable relevance for national defense policy. The question whether Europe is "under threat" builds solidarity within the EU and may potentially bring the different national interpretations of European history closer together. Both of these can foster shifts in the understanding of what European defense should look like in the future. Nevertheless, European countries do differ not only in the capacity but also in the willingness to adapt and accept change in their strategic cultures. Moreover, there are factors that might rather impede than accelerate change, such as historical, geographical or even colonial legacies.

Detecting strategic cultural continuity is relatively straightforward. It is evident in the ways we often take things for granted–when there is no need or impetus to think or act differently, we typically don't. Detecting change, however, is a more complex matter. But why is that?

The reason for this lies not only in the abstract nature of strategic culture but also in the myriad ways strategic cultural change can manifest itself.

To illustrate this, let us consider the question of Finland's decision to apply for NATO membership. Finns often frame their understanding of war, peace and the use of military force through the collective national memory of independence 1917, the subsequent civil war in 1918 and the Winter and Continuation Wars with Soviet Union (1939–1944). This history has crystallized in a few key strategic maxims with a strong strategic cultural foundation: In order to survive, Finland must maintain strong social cohesion and unity, and it should never again find itself alone in the face of a much stronger and more aggressive power.

When Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, Finns turned to the strategic maxims that had formed the cornerstone of post-WW II Finnish security and defense policy – principles that Finns had long taken for granted due to their geographical location and national history. However, the pressing question was how to adapt these principles to the new geopolitical context and adjust strategies and policies accordingly. Rather than maintaining military neutrality and despite the legacy of policy of conformity toward Russia, which had been the practical manifestation of these maxims during the Cold War (Finlandization), Finns chose to reverse course and align themselves militarily with NATO. This shift was facilitated by the strong compatibility of the Finnish Armed Forces with NATO, as well as Finland's status as a NATO Partnership for Peace member since 1994. But more than that, within NATO, Finland was widely regarded not only as a mature democracy but also a steadfast partner and a valuable ally.

Information Box: Policy Change versus Strategic Cultural Change – What's the Difference?

It is useful to distinguish between policy change and strategic cultural change, as the two are often conflated in public perceptions of what constitutes 'change'. One clear way to express the difference is to note that policy changes generally observable, since policies tend to produce tangible outcomes.

In contrast, manifestations of strategic cultural change may not be immediately apparent, as strategic cultures are often "sticky" and resistant to rapid transformation.

Another perspective is to view strategic cultural change as more "profound" than a mere reorientation or adjustment of policy. It affects the underlying assumptions and motivations that guide why strategic actors pursue particular policies in the first place.

Policy change can also be an outcome of strategic cultural change. This is not to suggest that policies have no influence on strategic culture, but rather that for a policy change to impact strategic culture, it generally needs to establish a sustained or institutionalized pattern of behaviour observable over a longer period of time.

For an observer unfamiliar with Finnish strategic culture, this may appear to be a straightforward, rational choice: a small country seeking shelter must either ally with or bandwagon with stronger powers to ensure its sovereignty and security. Conflicts and wars often limit the options available for small states. However, a closer examination of Finnish strategic culture reveals that the decision to apply for NATO membership cannot be explained by rational logic alone. The overwhelming majority of Finns supported the membership bid, which stands in stark contrast to the low levels of support for NATO-membership in recent years. Therefore, to argue that the Finnish decision to apply for NATO was based solely based on the rational maximization of national interests would render the previous strategy somewhat irrational – or *vice versa* – especially given that the Finland's national security interests have remained largely intact.

In contrast, strategic culture helps us understand how and why Finns thought and acted strategically the way they did. Rather than directly answering why Finland chose to apply for NATO-membership, it explains why it the decision to join NATO was considered strategically sound at this particular moment in time.

Strategic culture is often "sticky", meaning it tends to build on lessons learned from the past. These lessons are drawn from formative national experiences, such as pivotal decisions or dramatic events, that shape the way views on peace, war, and the use of military force have evolved. The substance of these lessons is expressed in different ways, including military doctrines, strategy papers and political discourse.

Stickiness is also the primary reason why strategic cultures tend to exhibit continuity. Post-WW II German strategic culture provides a good example of this.[9] The legacy of Nazism, Hitler's wars of aggression, and the resulting questions of German guilt left a lasting imprint on the post-war German strategic thinking. The so-called principles of "never again," based on the lessons learned from Nazism, became the cornerstone of German strategic thought for decades: war should never again originate from German soil and Germany should never again go it alone. This principle played a key role in constructing German self-image as a civilian power, a stance that has been seriously challenged only a few times in the post-Cold War era – during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, the Kosovo War in 1998–99, and in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Thus, it is precisely in times of crises, conflicts, and wars that the resilience of strategic culture – particularly national memory – is put to the test. In such moments, actors must weigh the lessons of the past against the pressures of the present while preparing for the future.

[9] Cf. Seppo, Antti: *From Guilt to Responsibility and Beyond. The Evolution of German Strategic Culture After the End of the Cold War*. Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2021.

2.5. Importance of Strategic Subcultures

Some strategic cultures exhibit strong uniformity in their patterns of thought and behavior. This is particularly true for autocratic countries like North Korea and Russia, but even some Western countries, such as Switzerland, could be considered to fall into this category. However, most countries are home to a range of competing – if not outright contradictory – views on the core aspects of their strategic cultures. In the literature on strategic culture, groups representing different strategic perspectives are sometimes described as forming distinct strategic sub-cultures.[10]

At the European level, for example, we could identify groups such as Transatlanticists and Europeanists, who hold differing strategic views on the role and nature of alliances, co-operation, and the responsibilities of alliance members. Strategic subcultures can also emerge on the state level. For instance, China's vast state bureaucracy represents various strategic cultural subsets, each with diverging political interests within the broader national strategic context. Similarly, the United States is characterized by competing strategic cultural traditions, such as isolationism, internationalism, and interventionism.

Some scholarly works describe NATO's strategic culture as a subculture of the European Union, arguing that "NATO's strategic culture in the 1990s has become a subcultural trait of shared and distinctive sets of values, norms and beliefs that are different from those held at the EU level."[11] In practice, this manifests in significant normative overlap, particularly regarding the identification of challenges and threats, as well as the role of third parties and international organizations. However, "there is an elementary difference in terms of values the institutions attach to the use of force, the sanctioned range and type of missions, and the resources justified to carry them out."[12]

These strategic cultural differences persist to this day, as the EU was originally founded as a peace project with a self-image focused on preserving peace, while NATO remains primarily a political and military alliance. Nonetheless, the EU's strategic culture has evolved in recent years to accommodate the U.S. pivot to Asia and to strengthen its own military capabilities in response to increasing Russian aggression and other emerging threats.

Traditionally, research on strategic culture has emphasized the central role of state actors and political elites as the "keepers" of strategic culture. However, over the past decade, the strategic culture literature has increasingly explored the strategic cultures of smaller, less uniform actors, such as terrorist

---

[10] Cf. Bloomfield, Alan: Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate. Contemporary Security Policy, vol. 33, issue 3, 2012, pp. 437-461; Gomez, Miguel Alberto: Overcoming uncertainty in cyberspace: strategic culture and cognitive schemas. Defence Studies, vol. 21, no. 1, 2021, pp. 25-46.

[11] Zyla, Benjamin: Overlap or Opposition? EU and NATO's Strategic (Sub-)Culture. Contemporary Security Policy, vol. 32, 2011, p. 668.

[12] Ibid.

organizations, advocacy groups, and governmental agencies that may ideologically compete for a hegemonic interpretation of strategic cultural attributes. For example, a study examines how different security-centered intra-governmental interest-groups formed subcultures that competed for strategic cultural hegemony in Israel from the late 1980s to the post- Cold War period, ultimately leading to a shift in Israel's security policy paradigm. By the 2010s, Israeli security policy had transformed from a focus on defending its territorial integrity against regular Arab armed forces to addressing a diverse range of state and non-state threats.[13] Thus, understanding strategic subcultures and their underlying patterns of thought can uncover internal discrepancies and provide insight into the strategic cultural divisions and varying orientations at the national level.



Figure 2. Strategic culture influences decision-making.

Moreover, these studies are significant not only because they highlight aspects of strategic cultural interaction that might not be immediately observable at the national level, but also because they offer an empirical understanding of how

[13] Libel, Tamir: Explaining the security paradigm shift: strategic culture, epistemic communities, and Israel's changing national security policy, Defence Studies, vol. 16, no. 2, 2016, pp. 137-156.

strategic culture operates in practice. For example, different advocacy groups may utilize various platforms to contemplate strategy and communicate their message. While strategic cultures at the national level often share many commonalities, their military cultures can differ considerably. Therefore, adopting a sub-cultural perspective can be analytically valuable, helping to uncover both the similarities and differences within various strategic cultures, as well as identifying the sources of strategic cultural change.

Furthermore, strategic cultural practices can be reflected in the expectations the broader public holds towards the military (and the use of force). It is crucial to remember that, especially in democracies, the legitimacy of how the strategic cultural attributes are interpreted and enacted by the "keepers" is ultimately judged in elections. Thus, the wider public has a fundamental veto over the broader strategic cultural agency of the "keepers". This underscores why public opinion matters–not only as the source of a shared, collective understanding of these issues, but also as a potential catalyst that can either facilitate or hinder specific types of strategic behavior.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Strategic culture is an analytical tool used to understand why states think and act the way they do on issues of war, peace, and military force. At the strategic level, knowledge of strategic culture helps practitioners interpret national biases and cultural nuances in defense and security interactions.
- It functions like a window: it reveals others' strategic mindsets while also reflecting one's own assumptions and biases. It offers conceptual frameworks and practical tools to understand strategic culture's influence on European security and defense cooperation.
- Strategic culture helps explain why states facing similar security dilemmas may still behave differently.
- Strategic culture shows both continuity (rooted in historical memory and past lessons) and change, especially during major geopolitical shifts (e.g., Finland's NATO decision, Europe after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine).
- Strategic cultures are often "sticky," shaped by formative experiences and expressed in doctrines, policies, and political discourse. Despite this, strategic cultural adaptation and change may occur.

3. How Strategic Culture Manifests in European Security

Let us illustrate the potential significance of strategic culture with a few examples drawn from various aspects of European security policy, including policy planning, defense industry cooperation, operations, and military education. We acknowledge that characterizing individual countries by certain traits, as we do in the following sections, carries a risk of oversimplification or reinforcing national stereotypes. However, we believe these examples will help clarify the underlying concept of national strategic cultures.

3.1. Policy Planning

As strategic culture shapes the framework through which a nation understands and addresses its security challenges, it plays a pivotal role in guiding national defense policy planning. This influence manifests in several ways:

First, strategic culture helps define national threats and challenges. As noted, it is deeply rooted in a nation's history, which influences how it perceives and responds to security risks. For instance, a country with a history full of military interventions may prioritize the ability to project power in distant regions, while a nation with a history of being invaded is more likely to focus on territorial defense. Similarly, countries in volatile regions often develop a strategic culture that emphasizes readiness and rapid response. Additionally, strategic culture plays a critical role in determining whether threats are viewed as primarily military, economic, ideological, or something else entirely.

On the other hand, strategic culture provides guidance for the military doctrine a nation adopts, shaping whether it leans toward offensive or defensive strategies. It also influences force structure and development, as decisions on whether to invest in conventional forces, nuclear capabilities, or asymmetric warfare are driven by cultural perceptions of effective security.

Additionally, the national policy-making process is shaped by strategic culture, particularly in areas such as the degree of civilian control over the military, the role of the armed forces in society, and the decision-making style – whether policies are crafted through consensus, hierarchical decisions, or reliance on technocrats. Similarly, strategic culture impacts a nation’s approach to international alliances: nations with a collective defense mindset (e.g., NATO members) view alliances as crucial, while others may prioritize strategic self-sufficiency.

Strategic culture is also integral to the European Union's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), shaping its development, priorities, and implementation. Its influence, however, is complex due to the diverse historical, political, and cultural contexts of the EU member states.

For example, the EU's foundational mission to promote peace and prevent conflict in the aftermath of World War II shapes its strategic culture. The Union is also marked by a preference for collective action: it prioritizes multilateral approaches and cooperative decision-making in security and defense affairs, reflecting the strategic orientations of many of its member states. Furthermore, the EU places particular importance on the rule of law, diplomacy, and human rights in the conduct of CSDP operations.

The diverse historical experiences of EU member states naturally pose challenges to the emergence of any Pan-European strategic culture. Member states with traditions of neutrality tend to exercise a cautious approach to EU military engagement, while Atlanticist states favor close alignment with NATO and the United States, emphasizing the importance of transatlantic security.

These divergences complicate efforts to develop a cohesive EU strategic culture. At the same time, they also foster compromise and gradual integration. Initiatives such as the European Defense Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) illustrate attempts to bring member states closer together around shared defense priorities. Indeed, the CSDP can be understood as a mechanism for balancing the Union's diverse strategic cultures. It may even be argued that European integration itself has contributed to gradual convergence of the strategic cultures.

3.2. Military-industrial Cooperation

Another area in which differences in European strategic cultures become visible is the defense-industrial collaboration among European states.

One key factor here is the varying degree to which states prioritize European strategic autonomy versus reliance on NATO. Some states, such as France, have strongly emphasized the need for European autonomy and have actively promoted ambitious, EU-led defense initiatives. Others, including Poland and the Baltic states, have placed greater weight on NATO's central role, viewing PESCO primarily as a complement to transatlantic security structures.

Differences also arise in the level of military ambition pursued by member states. Countries such as Germany and Italy have traditionally favored broad participation and consensus-oriented approaches, often supporting inclusive projects over high-end capability development. By contrast, France has prioritized the advancement of cutting-edge military capabilities and placed greater weight on strategic autonomy than on inclusiveness.

At the regional level, Southern European states (e.g., Italy, Spain, Greece) tend to emphasize Mediterranean security challenges, such as migration pressures and instability in North Africa. In contrast, Eastern member states (e.g., Poland, Lithuania) prioritize countering threats from Russia, which in turn shapes their project selection within PESCO.

EU defense industrial cooperation is promoted through initiatives such as the European Defense Fund (EDF) and broader efforts to integrate the European defense industrial base. Here too, national strategic cultures play a significant role, shaping both the extent of member states' engagement and the specific priorities they pursue within these initiatives.

For example, while France and Germany both advocate a stronger European defense industry, they frequently prioritize their own national industries, which can generate tensions in joint development projects. Smaller states, or those with less developed defense sectors, may in turn view EU initiatives as valuable opportunities to access funding, technology and collaborative networks.

Member states with substantial arms export industries, such as France and Italy, are more inclined to support initiatives that enhance competitiveness and export potential. Others, like Sweden, focus on niche technologies and innovation, often aligning closely with the EU's broader goals for technological sovereignty. Germany represents yet another case: despite being a major global arms producer and exporter, its weapons export policies remain heavily constrained by the restrictive nature of its strategic cultural determinants.

Wealthier states with mature defense industries often favor joint projects aimed at advancing high-tech capabilities. Conversely, less affluent states may prioritize EU funding as a means to modernize their armed forces and improve interoperability with larger member states.

3.3. Military Education

While modern military education focuses heavily on diverse pedagogical, leadership and technical competencies, it can also be seen as closely connected to strategic culture in several ways.

Within the strategic culture literature, it is typically assumed that strategic culture shapes professional military education. When national decision-makers reformulate their fundamental understandings of the international environment, the threats to national sovereignty, and the means of safeguarding the state, strategic culture evolves accordingly. These shifts are expected to be reflected in military education as well.[14]

At the same time, professional military education may itself act as a driver of strategic culture. Through systematic analysis and foresight, military educational institutions examine the international security environment, identify emerging threats, and explore ways to counter them. When their assessments prove accurate, these institutions may anticipate long-term developments and become the first to recognize factors that later shape a country's strategic culture.

[14] Rostoks, Tom: Strategic culture and professional military education in Latvia, International Society of Military Sciences Paper, https://www.isofms.org/resource/dm/175258364718671157.pdf?n=Rostoks%2CToms.pdf&inline=yes.

Conversely, military education institutions may seek to distance themselves from strategic culture-related teaching and instead concentrate on less contested, more stable areas of professional education. Because a country's assessment of the international environment may shift over time, recognizing this volatility can lead to reluctance to embed strategic culture elements in military curricula. This creates a tendency to emphasize subjects – such as engineering and mathematics – that are expected to equip cadets to succeed under any strategic circumstances. Inevitably, however, there is tension in attempts to separate professional military education from strategic culture, as such separation cannot–and arguably should not-be fully achieved.[15]

3.4. Operations

Many of the features discussed above also apply to military and civilian operations. These effects are visible in decision-making, operational planning, and the implementation of missions, for example in the following ways:

To begin with, member states vary in the degree to which they adopt interventionist or non-interventionist strategic orientations. Countries with interventionist traditions, such as France and the pre-Brexit United Kingdom, often support robust military operations and proactive crisis management. By contrast, neutral states like Austria or Ireland tend to prioritize civilian missions or peacekeeping over more coercive forms of engagement. Differences in strategic cultures also influence willingness to participate in high-risk operations: some states (e.g., Germany) display a low tolerance for military casualties, and therefore favor operational designs that minimize risk, whereas others (e.g., France) are more prepared to deploy forces in active combat roles. These divergences shape the scope, mandate, and design of missions, and frequently result in compromises that combine both military and civilian components.

European countries likewise differ in their regional priorities for international operations. France has traditionally focused on Africa–particularly the Sahel–reflecting its post-colonial ties and strategic emphasis on counterterrorism. Eastern European states (e.g., Poland, Baltic states) tend to promote operations in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, driven by concerns over Russian aggression. Southern European members (e.g., Italy, Spain), in turn, highlight Mediterranean stability, migration control, and the fight against transnational threats.

As a result, the diverse strategic cultures of EU member states create both challenges and opportunities for operational effectiveness. Challenges include potential consensus deadlock, where incompatible national preferences can delay

[15] Rostoks, Tom: Strategic culture and professional military education in Latvia, International Society of Military Sciences Paper, https://www.isofms.org/resource/dm/175258364718671157.pdf?n=Rostoks%2CToms.pdf&inline=yes.

decision-making or produce diluted mandates, as well as fragmented national contributions that can lead to operational inefficiencies.

At the same time, diversity can be an asset: on the one hand, it enables innovative mission designs that integrate military, civilian, and diplomatic instruments; on the other, participation in joint missions can foster mutual understanding and contribute to the gradual convergence of national strategic cultures over time.



Figure 3. European strategic culture in action.

3.5. Is Strategic Culture an Enabler or a Constraint?

According to a 2013 study by Biehl, Giegerich and Jonas, a coherent European strategic culture could not be identified among the 28 countries examined. Nevertheless, the study allows for assessments of areas within foreign, security, and defense policy where conditions for cooperation between states are more or less favorable.[16] The authors argue that the value of the concept lies in highlighting both the opportunities and limitations for broad-scale cooperation among European countries, rather than being confined to existing collaborative structures.[17]

In general, it is useful to recognize that strategic culture does not compel action, and does not "cause" outcomes on its own. Rather, it provides a lens through which we can understand why certain policies or actions are preferred over others, while other factors may explain why particular decisions are ultimately taken. At the national level, strategic culture can be seen as a cultural filter around the political decision-making process: every policy debate and decision in parliament inevitably passes through this filter. In this way, strategic culture influences and shapes decisions without dictating them. Consequently, it can be helpful to view this filter as either enabling or constraining, depending on the issue at hand and the specific political-strategic context.

Thus, whether strategic culture ends up shaping to be an enabler or a constraint for policy-making is rather an empirical question depending on the specifics of the strategic culture in question. What we hope to be a key takeaway from this manual is the notion that we neglect strategic cultural aspects at our own peril. Without knowledge on what makes strategic cultures "tick", we would not be able to fully grasp the different causal beliefs driving strategic cultural adaptation in Europe. This includes ethical debates on issues of war, peace and the use of military force where intentions and responsibility may clash due to differing strategic interests of the involved parties. With the current debate on how Europe should organize its defense efforts in the future, we should also pay more attention to how nuclear issues are framed in different European strategic cultures, because they have–until recently–been neglected in the discussion on the future of European security.

[16] Biehl, Heiko, Bastian Giegerich & Alexandra Jonas: *Strategic Cultures in Europe: Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent*, Springer VS, Germany, 2013, pages 391-393.
[17] Ibid., p. 8.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Strategic culture shapes national defense policy, influencing how states define threats, choose military doctrines, build force structures, and design decision-making processes.
- States' strategic cultures determine whether they prioritize territorial defense, power projection, rapid response, conventional forces, nuclear capabilities, or asymmetric tools.
- Military education both reflects and shapes strategic culture, either embedding cultural assumptions or distancing itself from them by focusing on technical competencies.
- Divergent strategic cultures can cause decision-making delays and fragmented deployments, but they can also enrich missions and promote long-term cultural convergence through cooperation.
- Strategic culture does not compel strategic action, but rather enables it by endorsing a set of strategic preferences.

Conclusion: Recommendations for Practitioners

Based on the above considerations, we propose a few practical tips for individuals involved in broad strategic questions in the context of European security cooperation. The list is not – and cannot be – exhaustive; rather, it is intended to encourage you to view everyday professional challenges through the lens of strategic culture.

- **Familiarize yourself with cultural approaches to security and defense policy.** Recognize the existence of different strategic cultures and remain aware of their implications. Doing so will make you a more effective professional!
- **Awareness of strategic culture is particularly valuable** for those who translate political objectives into military strategy and military strategy into operational plans.
- **Remember that we are all shaped by strategic culture in various ways**. It is important to be attentive to cultural factors influencing the strategic choices and security policies not only of your own country but also of partners and potential adversaries.
- **When incompatibilities or other challenges arise, identify areas of overlap.** Look for opportunities and limitations in cooperation. Understanding others' strategic preferences– and the culturally rooted reasons behind them–can help uncover common ground.
- **Strategic culture does not "cause" outcomes on its own.** Focus instead on the "keepers" of strategic culture and how they interpret peace, war and the use of military force.
- **Recognize that national strategic cultures, while generally "sticky," can change–sometimes rapidly.** Be sensitive to historical and cultural influences but avoid overestimating the weight of tradition.
- **Be aware of the role played by professional interest groups in your field.** Such groups can significantly shape how particular strategic cultural attributes are interpreted, prioritized, and acted upon.
- **Actively reflect on your role as a strategic cultural agent.** Consider how you would describe yourself–and your country's strategic culture– to someone seeking to understand your strategic thinking and behavior.
- **View strategic culture as a resource.** Treat it as a window of opportunity, a means of learning from others, and a tool for reflecting your own assumptions–ultimately helping you become a better strategist!

Sources

Biehl, Heiko, Bastian Giegerich & Alexandra Jonas: *Strategic Cultures in Europe: Security and Defense Policies Across the Continent*, Springer VS, Germany, 2013.

Bodescu, Alin: Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Military Officer Profession, SQF-MILOFt, VOL1, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

Bodescu, Alin: Sectoral Qualifications Framework for the Military Officer Profession, SQF-MILOFt, VOL2, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

Libel, Tamir: Explaining the security paradigm shift: strategic culture, epistemic communities, and Israel's changing national security policy, *Defense Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2016, pp. 137-156.

Lin, Leo: Strategic Subcultures and Grand Strategy Formation: A Neoclassical Realist View. Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies (RAIS), June 2020.

Rostoks, Tom: Strategic culture and professional military education in Latvia. [https://www.isofms.org/resource/dm/175258364718671157.pdf?n=Rostoks%2Ctoms.pdf&inline=yes].

Seppo, Antti: *From Guilt to Responsibility and Beyond. The Evolution of German Strategic Culture After the End of the Cold War*. Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2021.

A Strategic Compass for Security and Defense - For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security, Brussels, 21 March 2022.

Strategic Culture: an elusive but necessary foundation for EU security and defense? A report based on an online seminar co-organised by the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie (DGRIS), French Ministry for the Armed Forces, on 18 June 2021. [https://www.iss.europa/eu/sites/default/files/EU-ISSFiles/Final %20Report%20-%20Strategic%20Culture.pdf].

Zyla, Benjamin (2011). Overlap or Opposition? EU and NATO's Strategic (Sub-)Culture. Contemporary Security Policy, vol. 32, 2011.

Further reading

Gray, Colin: Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture. *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 26, no.1, 2007, pp. 1-20.

Hyde-Price, Adrian: European Security, Strategic Culture, and the Use of Force, *European Security*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2004, pp. 323–343.

Kartchner, Kerry M., Briana D. Bowen, Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, Briana D. Bowen, ja Jeannie L. Johnson. *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2024.

Johnston, Alastair Iain: *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995.

Meyer, Christoph O.: *The Quest for a European Strategic Culture. Changing Norms on Security and Defense in the European Union*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Neumann, Iver B. & Heikka, Henrikki: Grand Strategy, Strategic Culture, Practice. *Co-Operation & Conflict*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2005, pp. 5-23.

Schmidt, Peter & Benjamin Zyla (eds.): *European Security Policy and Strategic Culture*, Routledge 2013.

Snyder, Jack L.: The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations, A Project Air Force Report Prepared for the United States Air Force, Rand Corporation, R-2154-AF, September 1977.

Toje, Asle. Strategic Culture as an Analytical Tool. History, capabilities, geopolitics and values: the EU example. *Western Balkans Security Observer*, no. 14 (July-September), 2009. [https://bezbednost.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/1001251501_western_balkans_sec.pdf#page=6].

National Defence University
Department of Warfare
P.O. Box 7, 00861 HELSINKI

Tel. +358 299 800

www.mpkk.fi

ISBN 978-951-25-3596-5 (Pbk.)
ISBN 978-951-25-3597-2 (PDF)
ISSN 2343-5275 (print)
ISSN 2343-5283 (online)

SOTATAIDON YTIMESSÄ

Puolustusvoimat
The Finnish Defence Forces