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The American Failure behind ‘Grand Strategic Cultures’ and Modern Conflict

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his work is about how a specific conceptualization of ‘culture’ in intelligence studies, amongst scholars at first but subsequently practitioners as well, has taken on too powerful a role, one that has become too restrictive in its impact on thinking about other intelligence communities, especially non-Western ones. This restriction brings about unintentional cognitive closure that damages intelligence analysis. My argument leans heavily in many ways on the fine work of Desch in Security Studies, who cogently brought to light over fifteen years ago how ultra-popular cultural theories were best utilized as supplements to traditional realist approaches and were not in fact capable of supplanting or replacing realist explanations entirely. Intelligence Studies today needs a similar ‘intellectual intervention’ as it has almost unknowingly advanced in the post-Cold War era on the coattails of Security Studies but has largely failed to apply some needed corrective measures that discipline enforced on itself when it came to cultural approaches over the past two and a half decades.

In the early literature within Intelligence Studies there were two traditions of ‘culture’ that, while affiliated with each other, were still quite distinct. The more accurate version in my opinion dealt with intelligence culture more in the manner of organizational culture, with its commensurate almost corporate-like elaborations. A second broader version co-existed alongside this, tied more intimately with the concept of a country’s strategic culture grandly defined. This version stated intelligence cultures would be a fairly accurate mimic or mirror of the grander strategic national culture. Every country’s strategic culture would be inevitably unique, tied within a complex web

of language, history, local custom, religion, ethnicity, etc. In time as a discipline Intelligence Studies has shifted from that quieter, more humble, and quite frankly more accurate and accessible conceptualization of culture to the grander one that is inherently more mysterious, semi-knowable at best. This is of course rather whimsically ironic given that the nation most responsible for this push is the state with by far the largest, most organizationally micro-managed intelligence community and is almost always victim to the accusation by other nations of having no true definable culture at all NOT dependent upon innate business-corporate concepts.

The consequence of this is important: this semi-mystical conceptualization can actually cause scholars and practitioners to get bogged down searching for ‘intrinsic essences’ of a grand strategic culture when all they should rightly focus on is how national security priorities can suddenly or surprisingly change and evolve, forcing intelligence communities to alter and adapt their organizational culture and subsequent priorities and foci. It is very much like the corporate mindset. In fact, intelligence communities by training and objective strive to be pragmatic and ‘non-cultural.’ For some reason Intelligence Studies over time has transformed this innate pragmatic struggle and made it more about problems within a state’s unique grand strategic culture, whatever it may happen to be. This not only oversteps the mark in terms of how we should be pursuing our research in Intelligence Studies, it does not accurately reflect reality as it ‘false forces’ scholars to ignore important modern minutiae that would otherwise be emphasized in a system focusing on corporate organizational culture instead. I find a connection with this process to the cognitive closure discussed brilliantly by Hatlebrette. Indeed, I am basically arguing here that over-adherence or over-emphasis on this ‘grand strategic cultural’ approach to intelligence evaluation often induces its own cognitive closure amongst scholars and practitioners, thus leading to inaccurate analyses and conclusions.

Intelligence communities by hook or by crook seek optimal information for gaining optimal insight over a dynamic evolving issue range. This is arguably especially the case for intelligence communities NOT in the West as they tend to not be the beneficiaries of internal political stability and intellectual traditions that have placed ‘rules of the game’ and operational/ethical constraints over Western intelligence behavior. Thus this work is both a rebuke against how the concept of grand strategic culture has evolved to dominate the research thinking of intelligence studies scholars and a plea to consciously return to the less grand but more accurate tradition of corporate organizational culture as a primary causal pathway to determine modern non-Western intelligence community behavior and priority-making.

Let’s take two very distinct ‘quick glance’ cases to illustrate all of this high-minded theory: the rise of radical Islam in the 1990s and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine today. There are TONS of scholarly, diplomatic, and journalistic confirmations since the 1990s testifying to the fact that the United States always had ample opportunity to understand the threat Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda could represent to the country. While this ‘intelligence failure’ has been examined from numerous sides that deal with communication gaps, bureaucratic infighting, and turf wars, what has been largely ignored is the fact that the national myopia on the part of America can be largely explained by its over-reliance on this grand strategic cultural approach of intelligence, which simply dictated to the entire country in the 1990s that America was impervious to any external terrorist threat. If it had jettisoned this approach and instead focused on the more

corporate organizational cultural approach, then all of the aforementioned information could have gained greater focus and relevance.

The conflict in Ukraine today is still massively misconstrued and misinformed in the West. Once again, it is the over-reliance on grand strategic culture that pushes the problem. This approach leaves an analyst with no choice but to begin from a foundation that assumes Russian aggression, Russian aspiration for re-establishing empire (whatever that actually means is never defined of course), and Russian desire to interfere in the affairs of its neighbors. All of these approaches are overblown and sometimes purposely misconstrued for the agendas of other parties. When utilizing an organizational cultural approach for intelligence, however, one is forced to look more carefully at the economic, political, and military agreements and deals that were already in place and meant to be enforced when the Maidan revolution took place and forced the Ukrainian President to flee. Focusing on the aftermath of that removal and the consequences to those micro-realities goes MUCH farther in explaining how the conflict has proceeded across Eastern Ukraine. The failure of the West to understand this or know how to engage the conflict so as to be a positive source for resolution rather than a hindrance to all parties is still stronger evidence of how the grand strategic cultural approach forces analysts to think in limited, stereotypical, and highly polarizing ways. Let alone the fact that accuracy is reduced as a consequence.

Since it is useless to close the scholarly barn door after the intellectual cows have escaped, the proposal here is to adopt the term ‘condition’ to take the place of the organizational concept of culture and allow the grand strategic concept of culture to maintain its naming rights. To understand intelligence communities – their beliefs, priorities, and operational goals in the modern day – one need not be a prophet of a country’s particular and parochial grand strategic culture. One simply needs to focus on the strategic and dynamic intelligence conditions that engage, create friction, and produce change – sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly – within the community in question. Ironically, this call for a similar ‘Deschian’ intellectual intervention that took place within Security Studies more than fifteen years ago also offers Intelligence Studies a chance to properly differentiate itself as a discipline from its ‘big brother’ and thus further solidify its place within the pantheon of intellectualism.