German Strategic Culture in the Wake of Afghanistan

Introduction – the concept of “strategic culture” emerged in the 1970’s in the discipline of political science/international relations as a response or compliment to “realist” theories. Simply, Realism and its various derivations posit that the international system in anarchic (the absence of a central authority) and that sovereign states must pursue their national interests in terms of power to enhance their security. For realists, states engage in self-help behavior and maximize their relative power positions vis-à-vis other states in order to maintain their independence and in extreme circumstances survive. Thus states’ preferences are assumed and their behavior is the function of rational calculations based on power and the international strategic environment. For many, these assumptions were not only overly restrictive but also inaccurate empirically. Analyzing US-Soviet nuclear weapons policy, Jack Snyder at the Rand Corporation instead argued that the two superpowers adopted different strategies/decision-making processes due to unique national level attributes that combine to form a distinctive “strategic culture.” Since then, there has been an impressive, if uneven, and expanding body of research (both in terms of case studies and theoretical development).

Definition of strategic culture – time and space consideration preclude an exhaustive review of the many definitions and debates regarding the most appropriate way to define and thus measure/operationalize the concept of strategic culture. A common theme in most of these arguments centers on whether strategic culture should be considered an independent cause of strategic policy/behavior or the outcome of other variables (demographics, technology, history, values, beliefs, etc.). Rather than explore the nuances of the different positions and their relative strengths and weaknesses, for the purposes of this brief discussion on German strategic culture, I will utilize a definition that incorporates the two perspectives (a so-called contextual approach). Strategic culture influences security policy decision making (an intervening cause) and is also the product of patterned behavior (various policy outputs). Or as Alan Bloomfield reiterates, “…cultures are like ‘repertoires’ that contain most, if not all, the strategies we need to successfully navigate our way through the social world of everyday collective human interaction…they are packages of both ideas and behavioural (sic) patterns inextricably linked together, informing or co-constituting one another.” More specifically, strategic culture

2 For a recent and extremely thorough overview of the numerous debates over definitions, see Alan Bloomfield (2012), Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate,” Contemporary Security Policy, 33:3, 437-461.
compromises the persisting (but not eternal) socially transmitted ideas, attitudes, traditions, and habits of mind and preferred methods of operation (so, behavior patterns) that are more or less specific to particular geographically based security community that has had a necessarily unique historical experience.4

In essence, it acts as a ‘toolkit’ for decision-makers, elites, and the public as they attempt to make sense of the strategic environment and decide on various policy options.

**German Strategic culture after WWII** – Few countries are haunted by their past like post World War II Germany. In the immediate post-war years, few Germans (at least in what would become the Federal Republic of Germany) had much of a desire to see their country remilitarize and play an active role in the emerging conflict between the United State and the Soviet Union. This sentiment was succinctly captured in the phrase – “ohne mich” – without me! Nonetheless, and for a number of reasons, it soon become clear that the new Federal Republic was needed in the East/West struggle. Obviously, for defense planners considerable thought and sensitivity and many variables would be involved – all influenced by the weight of German history. In terms of the nascent German strategic culture, one scholar referred to this time as “Stunde Null” or “Zero Hour.”5 The organization of the Bundeswehr and German defense policy for the entire Cold War would directly reflect the profound influence of Germany’s traumatic past. German strategic culture would manifest itself in four key aspects: civil-military relations (Innere Führung and the Citizen Soldier/Staatsbürger in Uniform), conscription, a purely territorial defensive military strategy, and commitment to multilateralism.

**German Strategic Culture after the end of the Cold War** – With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the concomitant end of the Cold War, a newly reunited Germany found its post-WWII strategic culture severely challenged. Domestic but more significantly external pressures calling for a “normalization” of German defense policy mounted. Frankly put, it was now time for a prosperous, powerful and (just as importantly) reliably democratic Germany to increase their contributions to regional and international security. Particularly in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, Germany was now expected to be a “provider of security not just a consumer.” For German decision makers, this would not be an easy sell to the German public. Furthermore, to meet these demands, the German Constitutional Court would need to reinterpret the legal restraints on German military deployment to out-of-area operations contained in the Basic Law (Grundgesetz) Article 87a. This happened in July 1994 when the Court ruled that the German government could deploy the Bundeswehr to out-of-areas missions on two conditions – the mission was authorized by a collective security organization and that the Bundestag approved the mandate. In what some describe as “salami tactics,” the German government incrementally

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expanded to use of the Bundeswehr in a number of humanitarian and peacekeeping operations (Somalia, the Balkans and Kosovo). Beyond this new found willingness to engage in out of area operations (exclusively for humanitarian purposes), most elements of Germany’s strategic culture remained. Decision-making and German security policy in general was still tightly embedded in multilateral institutions like NATO and the EU. Despite the fact that most west European states abandoned conscription (and more importantly there appeared little military rational for the expensive and outdated policy), Germany maintained the practice.

German Strategic Culture and Afghanistan – Germany’s military involvement in Afghanistan was a profound challenge to the country’s strategic culture. After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, NATO invoked Article 5 (collective defense) for the first time in the organization’s history. Subsequently, in December 2001, the United Nations authorized the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan. Germany would play an important part in the ISAF operations until its conclusion on December 31, 2014. For Germany, this 13-year experience would be its most significant test to date. Although contributing a small number of Special Operations Forces in the early years of ISAF, Germany’s most substantial contribution began in October 2003 when the German Bundestag approved a contingent of military forces and civilians to the northern province of Kunduz to assist with development and reconstruction. Shortly thereafter, German took over control of a PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team).6 However, the German government refused to characterize this mission as combat and instead continually referred the Bundeswehr’s deployment as “stabilization and reconstruction” operations. In addition, German troops were restricted to the relatively peacefully north and Berlin maintained a number of “caveats” on the types of activities that German units would be permitted to perform. Two factors called into question the accuracy and honesty of describing both ISAF and the Bundeswehr’s responsibilities as purely stabilization and reconstruction operations. First, by 2007, the Taliban-led insurgency began to escalate and with it a drastic increase in violence against NATO troops. This escalation also included the hitherto safe regions of northern Afghanistan. Second, in 2009 German aircraft attacked two hijacked fuel tankers and mistakenly bombed and killed over 100 civilians. Overall, when it comes to Germany strategic culture, the Afghan experience has produced mixed results. For the military and some political leaders, the 10-plus years encouraged a new willingness to commit German troops to multilateral operations that may in fact involve kinetic operations (far beyond peacekeeping and stabilization). This entailed a modest effort at developing a counterinsurgency doctrine. Also due in large part to financial constraints conscription (a foundational element of Germany’s post-WWII strategic culture) was terminated in 2011. The military itself started to embrace a new image. As one expert puts it, “While the early, and still peaceful years, in Afghanistan solidified the impression of the armed aid worker, a greater sense of realism came to prevail once the Bundeswehr began to actively fight and push back the Taliban. This also found expression in public symbols, like campaign medals and the Bundeswehr Memorial that commemorates the Bundeswehr dead.”7 However, and despite these important adjustments within the armed forces,

in broader terms for much of the German polity, the Afghan experience may have actually reinforced Germany’s strategic culture of restraint. Berlin chose not to participate in the NATO-led 2011 humanitarian operation in Libya (Operation Unified Protector). Defense spending remains well below NATO obligations (only 1.16% of GDP in 2015 and 1.15% in 2016). Finally, a recent Pew Research Center survey found that only 25% of Germans supported the statement that Germany “Should play a more active military role.”

The Future - In the 70 years since its defeat in World War II, Germany has come a long way. Economically, it is clearly Europe’s powerhouse and the leader of the European Union. Militarily, however, German’s past continues to weigh heavily and its strategic culture of restraint inhibits Berlin’s ability and willingness to assume a more active leadership role beyond economics and multilateral diplomacy. Invoking an older adage, one observer in 2013 pointed out that “Germans…would still rather be security consumers than security providers. People still believe in this big Switzerland thing…that we don’t have to go outside our borders.”

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