

The Utility of Strategic Culture in Understanding Russian Views on European Security

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Abstract

This article traces the evolution and enduring value of the concept of strategic culture in understanding state behaviour, particularly in defence and foreign policy. Originating with Jack Snyder's 1977 analysis of Soviet nuclear doctrine, strategic culture reframed security studies by emphasising historically-rooted beliefs, norms, and institutional patterns rather than purely rational or material calculations. Subsequent scholarship has expanded its application across states, non-state actors and supranational entities. Still, persistent challenges remain, including definitional ambiguity, generalisation, and debates over continuity and change. Despite this, strategic culture continues to shape policy issues, such as tailored deterrence and other aspects of defence planning. The article highlights Jeannie Johnson's 'cultural topography' approach, which systematises cultural analysis through four "lenses": those of identity, norms, values, and perceptions. Applying this method to Russian policymaking illustrates how deeply embedded perceptions of identity, threat, and power shape its approach to European security under Vladimir Putin's regime. Russia's behaviour in Ukraine reflects a strategic culture emphasising historical grievances, the centrality of force, and the personification of state decisions by the leader. The study concludes that understanding these cultural underpinnings is essential for anticipating Russia's actions, shaping allied policy responses, and informing future strategic stability and deterrence planning.

Introduction

This article describes the development of the concept of strategic culture, which is in its fifth decade, and its considerable potential for informing and analysing foreign policy-making and defence planning. Following

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a discussion of the challenges associated with instrumentalising interpretations of culture, attention is drawn to the cultural topography method, developed by Jeannie Johnson and her associates. It provides a systematic approach to collecting and synthesising cultural data within four distinct “lenses”. Limited application of this method is used to illustrate Russia’s strategic approach to European security. The aim of this article is to illustrate the utility that cultural topography offers for guiding analysis of adversaries, improving understandings of their perceptions and setting strategic expectations that can support decision-making.

Evolution of Strategic Culture Theory

The current concept of strategic culture originated with Jack Snyder’s ground-breaking 1977 study of Soviet nuclear doctrine (Snyder, 1977). In that report, published by the RAND Corporation, Snyder defined the term as enduring ‘beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour patterns’ in security affairs. Almost fifty years later, it is easy to overlook how different the perspective put forward by Snyder actually was at the time. Previous assessments of how the Soviet Union conceived the utility of its nuclear weapons overwhelmingly relied on rational choice models of deterrence. They were largely capability-driven, focusing on Soviet force structures, weapons systems, and balance-of-power calculations, and relied on “mirror imaging” – US strategists interpreted Soviet behaviour through their own lens (Johnston, 1995; Booth, 1979). Snyder’s innovative approach argued that in reality, the Soviet nuclear doctrine was shaped by a set of ingrained ideas, historical experiences, and institutional norms – in short, it was a unique strategic culture (Gray, 1981).

In the 1980s, early criticism of this approach emphasised that these factors were subjective and hard to quantify, but Snyder’s concept remained influential. In the 1990s, Alastair Iain Johnston described China’s strategic culture as an “ideational milieu” which constrains the use of force (Johnston, 1995). Comparative studies on this topic expanded across Europe and Asia (Katzenstein, 1995; Johnston, 1995), and, following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, scholars began applying ideas of strategic cultures to a wide range of actors and subjects. This included asking whether non-state actors, such as terrorist groups (Long, 2009), or supranational entities, for example, the EU (Schmitt et al., 2005), have or could have a distinct “strategic culture”. Analysts have also begun looking at various issues such as the war on terror,

and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction through a strategic culture lens (Johnson, Kartchner, and Larsen, 2009).

Challenges, Debates, Criticisms, and Limitations

Despite its appeal, strategic culture faces persistent criticism. Conceptual ambiguity is central: the absence of a commonly agreed definition or taxonomy regarding what “is” and “is not” strategic culture makes cross-comparison difficult. Another problem is that overly-rigid interpretations risk implying fixed national characters. Attempting to define the characteristics of an entire group or nationality can lead to overly simplistic analysis which ignores individual agency and other factors that can undermine nuances regarding complex security issues. This can be alleviated by focusing analysis on a nation’s “defence and security elite”, but it should be acknowledged that within that group there will be multiple different “subcultures”, or “belief clusters”, which compete for dominance on specific issues (Heuser, 1998).

A third challenge has centred on continuity versus change. It is generally assumed that strategic cultures are slow to change, embedded in institutions and historical memory. However, shocks or dilemmas can cause rapid shifts in security orientations, for example relatively dramatic shifts in Japan’s strategic culture after North Korea’s 2006 nuclear test (Shinoda, 2011). Consequently, depending on how the Russo-Ukraine conflict ends, it is reasonable to assume that the possible outcome will have a lasting effect on the strategic culture of one or both parties.

Policy Relevance and Applications

Despite criticism, strategic culture has utility in understanding and anticipating state behaviour, particularly in relation to defence planning. This perspective has informed the “tailored deterrence” approach, which gained traction in the 2000s (Payne, 2003; Bunn, 2007). It proposes that, to maximise chances of success, deterrent strategies should be adapted to an adversary’s cultural context¹.

¹ Without being in the room where strategies intended to deter Russian actions in Ukraine are being developed (if, indeed, they are being developed), it is difficult to say to what extent the philosophies of tailored deterrence, as set out by Bunn, Payne

Cultural predispositions also shape conventional defence planning. For instance, American strategic culture – amongst other concepts, shaped by a sense of exceptionalism – emphasises direct, technology-intensive warfare (Mahnken, 2009). In contrast, Japan’s post-war anti-militarist culture institutionalised restraint through the Yoshida Doctrine and reliance on the US for security (Berger, 1998). Such insights can help policymakers and planners anticipate national choices regarding strategy and defence.

Recent studies that have been particularly beneficial regarding deterrence and influence analysis put forward the “cultural topography” approach developed by Dr Jeannie Johnson of Utah State University and co-authors. They propose four “lenses” or perspectives through which to examine cultural data relating to a group, namely, “identity” (the character traits the group assigns to itself, the reputation it pursues, and individual roles and statuses it designates to members); “norms” (the accepted and expected modes of behaviour of the group); “values” (the material or ideational goods that are honoured or that confer increased status to members in the group); and “perceptual lens” (the filter through which the group determines “facts” about others) (Johnson and Berrett, 2011).

The authors argue that these lenses have considerable value for guiding researchers in the collection and synthesis of evidence relating to the cultural factors that determine the strategic behaviour of states. In the remainder of the article, we briefly examine how they can be applied to Russia’s approach to European security under Vladimir Putin’s regime and, thereby, offer deeper insight into how Western allies could respond militarily to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, in any negotiations that occur, and overall, in future relations between these parties.

The Main Features of Russian Strategic Culture Pertaining to European Security

Building on recent research by RAND Europe, Russian strategic culture may be described using certain key features (Eken et al., 2025). The *identity* and *values* of the Russian state may be defined in relation to an autocratic political system in which decision-making is centralised and personified by

and others, are being applied. Nonetheless, the author’s own experience highlights that, while the core concepts of deterrence are simple to grasp, the practicalities of developing, implementing, and assessing ‘integrated’ deterrence (i.e., using all levers of national power) campaigns are inherently challenging.

the leader; an orthodox belief system that preaches loyalty and obedience to the state; and a conviction that all Russian and Slavic peoples are to be one nation.² Putin defines the latter in terms of “triunity”, meaning the historical unity of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians.

With respect to the *perceptual lens* through which Kremlin leaders understand the world, there is a strong conviction among them that Russia plays a stable historical role as a great power, despite periods of weakness. This power is perceived to be crucial because Russia has been constantly threatened from the West, which seeks to undermine and weaken the country. In these respects, Kremlin leaders are convinced that Russia is and must remain a great power beside and in opposition to the West.

These factors relate closely to a principal *norm* in Russian strategic culture, namely that leaders tend to see the present as deeply rooted in the past. Additionally, perceived threats tend to be addressed in a similar manner and typically with force. Indeed, force is understood to be the primary mode for states to achieve their goals in international relations, which are seen in zero-sum terms. Thus, for Russia to succeed against a stronger adversary – the West – asymmetric means in the information and cyber domains, sabotage, as well as deception, must play an important role.

Although not comprehensive, these features offer a foundation upon which to provide some insight into the current Russian leadership’s approach to European security in general, and specifically regarding its aggression in Ukraine. These features may provide an indicative guide for reflecting and anticipating how Russia historically, and Putin’s Russia in particular, tends to engage in strategic matters.

At the very least, strategic culture gives insight into the historical and social influences on Russian elites, and the analysis of their behaviour, making it possible for the policymakers to develop capabilities and policies that can ensure strategic stability in the future.

² These three features – autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality – are central to the Russian state and were identified in the 19th century by the Russian intellectual and deputy minister of national education Sergei Uvarov (1786–1855). On Uvarov’s work see, for example, Whittaker, 1978.

Putin's View on the Security of Europe from 2007

In the years prior to and following 2014, Russia's aggression in Ukraine and in wider Europe was defined by a consistent Kremlin narrative that Russia was threatened by the West and that its security was being undermined. The 2007 Munich speech is generally considered to be the key moment when Putin first articulated this view by rejecting what he perceived as the "unipolar" post-Cold War security order, and objecting to the expansion of NATO, which he described as a 'serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust' (President of Russia, 2007).

In terms of strategic culture, the Munich Speech can be interpreted as a kind of reversion to general type. In that address, Putin argued that the West has been in relative decline as other states developed, notably the BRICS. The speech marked the moment when Putin revealed his determination that, once again, Russia should emerge from a period of weakness to one of independence and regional assertiveness.³ According to him, throughout its history of over a thousand years, Russia had always exercised its "privilege" to an independent foreign policy (President of Russia, 2007). An alternative interpretation is that the speech was a means to securitise NATO enlargement, and that the Russian military did not actually perceive a real threat. However, there were several aspects which justified and contributed to the Russian military modernisation programmes that began in 2010, such as the military invasion into Georgia in 2008, where the aim was to halt Tbilisi's Western path, and the failures of the Russian Armed Forces in prosecuting that war. In this respect, President Dmitry Medvedev's tenure between 2008–2012 did not substantially alter Russia's anti-Western trajectory.

Clearly, Putin's speech was an articulation of a *particular* strategic perception and not every Russian leader behaves in the same way. Still, it does betray some of the semi-permanent aspects of Russian strategic thinking that are socialised to the level of culture, which Snyder sought to identify when he developed the concept of strategic culture (Snyder, 1977). Indeed, as Serhii Plokhly has shown, Putin's beliefs about Russia, and its relations in Europe, are a synthesis of several historical and intellectual influences (Plokhly, 2023). More importantly, the crucial characteristic of

³ This view of Russia as an independent and influential power in its immediate neighbourhood was held among Russia's foreign policy elite, as described by Averre, 2009.

Russian strategic culture is that its features are ultimately personified in the leader's decisions, and as Plokhly notes, the decision to annex Crimea was taken solely by Putin, without the influence of ministers or advisers (Plokhly, 2023).

After the Munich speech, Putin's idea of an East Slavic nation, comprised entirely of "Russian" enclaves including Belarus and Ukraine, became the defining issue in his strategic calculus. In 2014, he stated that 'in people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia' (President of Russia, 2014). His 2021 piece 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' is the definitive precedent on this matter (President of Russia, 2021a). In that work, he drew on Russia's nationalist and orthodox identity, and a perceptual lens in which the West was reaching into regional issues over which which Russia had exclusive privilege. Furthermore, he stated that there were 'millions of people in Ukraine who want to restore relations with Russia', but that an 'anti-Russia agenda is being pursued', 'certain threats are being created' that require a decision from the Kremlin, and that 'Russia's concerns must be taken seriously' (President of Russia, 2021b). Just as in the case of Georgia, within months of Putin talking in such terms, Russia launched its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine.

The Idea of 'Root Causes' and their Implications for Russia's Approach to Negotiations

Putin's perception of the conflict in Ukraine as having "root causes" is crucial to the process of assessing his red lines in this conflict, and his approach to negotiations. As he stated in 2021, 'it is essentially important for all of us to understand the current situation based on the historical context of its roots' (President of Russia, 2021b). This means that Putin views the situation in Ukraine as the result of an anti-Russian project that tries to divide and rule the Russian people. Putin's view is that, despite Russia's botched invasion, an end to the war cannot be agreed unless the West takes its interests into account. To put it another way, Putin will not come to the negotiation table on Western or Ukrainian terms. It follows that Russia is not a reliable negotiating partner and if peace is to be achieved, other means must be applied to push Putin towards dialogue.

The issue of root causes is fundamental for Putin. This is evident from the fact that war is still ongoing, despite shortfalls in Russia's military

campaign to seize Ukraine, the mounting costs to Russia, not least in terms of dead and wounded, and the increasing frequency and impact of Ukrainian attacks on Russian territory. Despite these problems, Putin has not changed his strategic course but doubled down through, most notably, the intensification of defence industrial production, and the introduction of high financial incentives for military recruits.

In the meeting of the Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in September 2025, Putin reiterated what he meant by the root causes. He described a *coup d'état* in Ukraine, which had been supported and provoked by the West, and further repeated that Western attempts to draw Ukraine into NATO pose a security threat to Russia. Putin stated that for the Ukrainian settlement to be 'sustainable and long-term' (i.e., for Russia to stop fighting), 'the root causes of the crisis must be eliminated' (Prezident Rossii 2025).

The Ukrainian leadership understands that Putin's determination to prosecute the Russo-Ukraine war outweighs any regard he might have of its mounting military and economic costs. Despite the challenge of maintaining a defence of the front, Ukraine's strategy has been to increase the cost of the war for ordinary Russians. Since Ukraine has understood that Putin is not willing to concede to the subordination of Ukraine to the Kremlin, Kyiv has started to deploy means that raise domestic pressures on Russia, initially through the 2024 invasion of Kursk and most recently through increased targeted attacks on Russia's energy infrastructure. To Ukraine, submission to the Kremlin is intolerable. The seriousness with which Ukraine takes Putin's narrative is instructive, despite its clear falsity. Indeed, that narrative should be the basis for relentless allied support to Kyiv. To put it another way, Ukraine's allies should understand that Putin must be stopped militarily if he is not to come back for more later.

Is Putin's Messaging out of Synchrony with Reality?

In 2025, Putin was caught in a military stalemate but started promoting the idea that, thanks to its actions thwarting the West and invading Ukraine, Russia was once again a key player in international state security. For him, even though discussions with the US government about the possibility of negotiations achieved little, they gave him a platform for bilateral dialogue, and an opportunity to talk about the so-called root causes of

the Russo-Ukrainian war the Russo-Ukrainian war. In his strategic view, meetings with the US President about security in Europe are a result in themselves, because they demonstrate the central duality in international relations that he covets. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in his September 2025 speech to the UN General Assembly, Russia believes, on the one hand, that NATO is “finding itself cramped” and expanding, and the West seeks the ‘strategic defeat of Russia’, but, on the other, that ‘Russia and the US bear a special responsibility for the state of affairs in the world’ (Lavrov, 2025).

Indeed, at a time when Russia also benefits from the economic, political, and diplomatic support of China, Putin is claiming something of a strategic victory, despite the enormous costs he has incurred, an uncertain outcome and a sense that Ukraine may be gaining an upper hand through its attacks on Russian infrastructure. At the 2025 meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, he stated that international relations are undergoing a ‘radical transformation’ in which a multipolar world is emerging directly because of Russia’s effort to test Western hegemony. As he said: ‘the global system... needs Russia as a very significant part of the overall balance’ (President of Russia, 2025).

Implications for Policymaking

Overall, the cultural topography approach can be used to collate and synthesise some of the most crucial traits related to the strategic culture of Russia. It clearly reveals Putin’s grievances about NATO and the “root causes” of the war in Ukraine, which may appear absurd to observers in the West, but which were sufficient for him to start a war and devote enormous resources to sustaining an offensive over years, despite limited returns. It also serves to reveal the growing risk that Putin will intensify claims that Russia’s military actions in Ukraine has resulted in a kind of victory for international relations, which is also clearly false. Thus, the cultural topographical approach can serve to identify the core tenets and traits in Russian leadership that should guide Western policy-makers. These tenets inform Putin’s engagement with the US, China, and NATO, and any future effort he makes to justify an end to the war on his own terms. As the Ukrainian government has consistently stated, it is impossible to negotiate with a country that does not recognise its existence, and that only

by defeating or continuing to weaken Russia in the military, economic, and social spheres, can enough leverage be gained to start negotiations.

Conclusion

This article outlined the historical development of the strategic culture paradigm, and the challenge of making strategic cultural analysis applicable for the defence and security policymaking and planning communities. However, the “cultural topography” approach, which involves the collection of cultural material and its synthesis within a framework of four “lenses”, can practically support strategic culture assessment, enabling analysts to set expectations and assumptions that can inform policy and capability development. To illustrate this, some of the principal features of Russian strategic culture were examined through these lenses to derive indicative insights into how the Russian regime views European security. This enabled the authors to highlight some crucial aspects of Putin’s strategic calculus, which have consistently underpinned Russia’s posture on Europe, and which continue to inform Putin’s strategic messaging. Such observations can frame allies’ thinking about how to interpret and anticipate Russia’s ongoing aggression on the continent and set expectations that underpin effective planning for the future.

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