Cultures, Conditions, and Cognitive Closure:
Pulling Intelligence Studies out of the Shadow of Security Studies
(aka Intelligence Cultures vs. Conditions)

This is about how the 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. The argument leans heavily in many ways on the fine work of Desch and Johnston 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 the same corrective measures. Ironically, this effort may be best accomplished by Intelligence Studies going back to Snyder in the 1970s and his warning that culture should be used as the explanation of last resort for Security Studies.

Key words: Intelligence Studies, Security Studies, strategic culture, organizational culture, cognitive closure, intelligence analysis.

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Cultures, Conditions, and Cognitive Closure: Pulling Intelligence Studies out of the Shadow of Security Studies

Introduction: Riding Coattails and Blazing Trails

This 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 on thinking about other intelligence communities, especially non-Western ones. This restriction brings about unintentional cognitive closure that hinders intelligence analysis. My argument leans heavily on the fine work of Desch and Johnston in Security Studies, who brought to light over fifteen years ago how ultra-popular cultural theories were best utilized as supplements to traditional realist approaches but were not in fact capable of supplanting or replacing realist explanations entirely. Intelligence Studies today needs a similar ‘intellectual intervention’ as it has glided along in the post-Cold War era on the coattails of Security Studies but has largely failed to apply those same corrective measures as concerns cultural analyses 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 and tied more intimately with the concept of a country’s strategic culture grandly defined.

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This version had intelligence cultures as a fairly accurate mimic or mirror of the greater strategic national culture. Every country’s strategic culture would be inevitably unique, tied together by a complex web of language, history, local custom, religion, ethnicity, etc. In time Intelligence Studies as a discipline shifted its analytical balance from that more humble but more accurate conceptualization of culture to the grander one that is inherently more mysterious and semi-knowable. This is of course ironic given that the nation most responsible for this shift is the United States, with by far the largest, most organizationally micro-managed intelligence community and almost always accused by other states of having no true definable culture NOT dependent upon innate corporate concepts.

The consequence is important: this semi-mystical and often de facto ambiguous conceptualization can actually cause scholars and practitioners alike to get bogged down searching for the ‘intrinsic essences’ of a grand strategic culture when all they should rightly focus on is how national security priorities can suddenly or surprisingly evolve, forcing intelligence communities to adapt their organizational culture so as to change priorities and foci. It is very much like a 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 deemphasized this innate pragmatism and made intelligence community analyses more about profoundly understanding 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 research on intelligence communities around the world, it ‘false forces’ scholars to under-emphasize modern organizational minutiae that would otherwise be causally important. I find this process
fascinatingly similar to the cognitive closure discussed brilliantly by Hatlebrekke and Smith.\(^2\) Indeed, the work here argues that the hunt for insights into ‘grand strategic cultures’ in order to better understand foreign intelligence communities 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 issue range. This is especially so for intelligence communities outside the West as they tend to not have the benefit of internal political stability nor the intellectual tradition to place operational and/or ethical constraints over intelligence behavior. Thus this work is both a gentle rebuke against how the concept of grand strategic culture has evolved to dominate the thinking of too many and a firm plea to consciously return to the less grand but more accurate tradition of corporate-like organizational culture as a primary causal pathway to determine modern non-Western intelligence community behavior and priority-making. 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 represent the organizational concept of culture and allow the grand strategic concept of culture to maintain its naming rights. This will also help provide some differentiation between this ‘organizational condition’ approach and the more formalized organizational culture used across many disciplines, especially within business.

In some ways this article inverts how many have often looked at the building of such ‘strategic intelligence conditions,’ where national security interests and domestic concerns are at best mere backdrops for the supposedly more important issues of ancient alliance, immutable culture, and rigid history. This project hopes to create more open

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discussions within intelligence studies that include multiple explanatory frameworks and
the creation of a free and vibrant exchange of ideas about how culture is viewed and applied
as an analytical concept within the discipline.\(^3\) 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. Rather the need is to focus on the
dynamic intelligence organizational conditions that evolve, create friction, and produce change
– sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly – within the community in question.

This call for a ‘Deschian’ intellectual intervention similar to the one that took place
within Security Studies more than fifteen years ago offers Intelligence Studies a chance to
differentiate itself from its ‘big brother’ and further solidify its place as an academic discipline.
Indeed, this work hopefully affirms how the emphasis on grand strategic cultures makes sense
within Security Studies but goes against common sense when applied within Intelligence
Studies. As a discipline, Intelligence Studies too often simply follows the lead of Security
Studies when it would be wiser to cautiously navigate a separate path. I believe the analytical
conceptualization of culture is one of those opportunities. Ironically, this effort to differentiate
may be accomplished best by Intelligence Studies going back to a foundational premise in
Security Studies during the 1970s that has since lost some of its influential luster: Snyder’s
warning that culture grandly defined should be used as the explanation of last resort.\(^4\) The
literature in Security Studies may have evolved to overcome Snyder’s concern but Intelligence

\(^3\) A More explicit elaboration of a new formula for analyzing non-Western intelligence communities, based on this
organizational corporate approach to culture, can be found forthcoming in Matthew Crosston, ‘Indian, Chinese, and
Russian Intelligence Communities: Bringing Cultures and Conditions into Comparative Perspective,’ International
Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, 28/3 (2015)

\(^4\) For the best explicit contextualization of this, see Edward Lock, ‘Refining Strategic Culture: Return of the Second
Studies, at least when it concerns the investigation of foreign intelligence communities via grand strategic cultures, would be wise to heed this wisdom.

The present work will first analyze the two traditions within the literature, with examples both positive and negative. It does this to show how non-radical the proposal being made here is: it is not so much a seismic shift but rather a reclaiming of original territory. From there six ‘case study glances’ will be offered to show how the positive and negative traditions amongst scholars and practitioners alike have produced dramatically different approaches and conclusions about foreign intelligence communities. In all, China, North Korea, Russia, Romania, Turkey, and Spain will be highlighted. The insights garnered at that point will then bring in contemporary discussions about transforming and adapting intelligence studies and how the present argument could be a positive influence on that process. Finally, two empirical examples (the emergence of radical Islam in the 1990s and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014) will be used to show how dangerous cognitive closure, caused by grand strategic culture, can be when examining the American intelligence community and how approaches focusing on organizational culture would have been more powerful.

**Grand Strategic Culture and Intelligence Studies: Fighting the Deus Ex Machina**

Examining the impact of culture on intelligence is in actuality not a recent investigation. Bonthous specifically tackled the issue in one of the discipline’s primary peer-reviewed journals over two decades ago.\(^5\) Unfortunately, that work showed the dichotomy that would come to epitomize the treatment of culture within Intelligence Studies overall. Indeed, on the one hand it discusses briefly that cultures can and do evolve and as such can lead to intelligence

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attitudes and practices that also adapt and change. But the concession is rather quickly overwhelmed by what this piece calls grand strategic culture (Bonthous referred to it simply as ‘national culture’) by testifying to its power as something shared ‘across religions, levels of education, social networks, companies and industries...even transcending ethnic groups’ and as such will inevitably foster or inhibit intelligence. The influence of national culture on intelligence is declared as something that will only become more important over time, not less so, and in that Bonthous was extremely prescient (though the accusation of self-fulfilling prophecy can certainly be levied against Intelligence Studies). The justification for this prediction is based on how ‘national culture’ is ultimately defined:

“Culture is the one element that weaves a homogeneous social fabric and survives mergers, acquisitions, and cross-border standardizations...Culture has deep, permanent roots in language, which, from birth, encodes images, concepts, and patterns of thinking into the people much like one programs a computer chip. Throughout life, both language and culture serve as a means of perceiving, representing and relating: hence the importance of language in shaping culture and the importance of culture in shaping intelligence.”

It would be natural to think this ebullient description is just a consequence of culture’s fame and popularity running rampant across many different disciplines in the early 1990s, especially Security Studies. But this assumption does not hold when the work of Duyvesteyn in 2011 is taken into consideration. Nearly two decades later the other primary peer-reviewed journal in the discipline dedicated an entire special issue to what was now called ‘strategic culture’ and its impact on intelligence writ large. Duyvesteyn’s enthusiasm, if anything, exceeded the original ebullience of Bonthous:

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6 Ibid. p.8
7 Ibid. p.8
“[Culture] provides a setting in which one can realistically expect to see through different implementations of the common tasks of ‘doing’ intelligence the role of culture providing influences, orientations, expectations that cannot be reduced to the internal logic of those tasks…Strategic culture can be read from a whole list and combination of sources: geography, climate, resources, history, experience, political structure, nature of organizations involved, myths and symbols, key texts and documents that inform actors of the appropriate action, transnational norms, generational change, and the role of technology. There are several custodians of strategic culture, such as elites, political institutions, public opinion, popular culture, and civil society.”

The problem with the above formulation should be starkly clear: the evolution of the concept from ‘national culture’ to ‘strategic culture’ has basically turned it into a *deus ex machina* in Intelligence Studies. We have come to define culture so broadly and so grandly that nearly everything possible to analyze has fallen beyond its analytical event horizon. Using such a definition creates several research nightmares: how are competing variables controlled? How are the multiple causal variables above parsed out and made distinct? How can any explanation based on the above conceptualization be falsifiable? As we will see later in the case study section, perhaps the gravest consequence of all isn’t a concern about methodological or research model clarity but rather the damage this over-encompassing conceptualization renders on the very cognitive processes of scholars themselves, creating analyses that are too mystical and untestable when simpler and cleaner analysis is available.

What is even more fascinating in the literature is that the tendency to ‘qualify but elevate’ continues. After all, Duyvesteyn herself declares that not enough work has been done on culture within intelligence and that while ‘the concept of culture is undisputed…many now prefer to see it as a context for understanding rather than possessing a clear causal and linear relationship with

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human behavior.\textsuperscript{10} Just as with Bonthous two decades before, Intelligence Studies scholars today tend to first qualify the causal power and explicit explanatory relevance of grand strategic culture only to then envelope all analysis under its banner. This is why some fine scholarly work today needs to be reclaimed back into the more subtle and more humble organizational camp. To me the most exemplary work of this kind belongs to what Davies has done on British and American intelligence. Most scholars have taken his work to represent an affirmation of grand strategic culture when in fact I think it maintains its highest power from an organizational cultural approach:

“Philip Davies has concluded in his study of intelligence cultures in the United States and the United Kingdom that the culture of the British intelligence apparatus tends toward an integrative intelligence culture, while the American intelligence culture could be more accurately characterized as disintegrative. These \textit{distinctive cultures} are prone to specific weak points; integrative cultures are highly sensitive to groupthink and disintegrative cultures to turf wars.”\textsuperscript{11}

As we will see in the next section, Davies is rather explicit in not trying to make his conclusions grandly cultural from a strategic perspective. It is the subsequent scholarly citations of his work that place him more in this camp. The above quote is definitive: instead of highlighting rather amorphous and undefined distinctive cultures (language often used in the grand strategic tradition), the discoveries of Davies are better understood through organizational structure. Might the highly disintegrative tendencies of American intelligence, commensurate with the danger of turf wars, be accounted for more powerfully and explicitly by looking at its massive size subdivided into seventeen competing intelligence agencies? Might the integrative trends within British intelligence, commensurate with the dangers of groupthink, be accounted for more

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid p.521.

readily and clearly by its lack of compartmentalization and segregation? The corporate organizational structure of the intelligence communities themselves is integrative and disintegrative, not the so-called grand strategic cultures of the two respective countries.

This tendency happens again and again in Intelligence Studies, where scholars claim to not necessarily be beholden to a grand strategic cultural approach for analyzing intelligence problems, but then spend an inordinate amount of time being just that:

“Strategic culture is of course a very broad concept but it very well suits the treatment of intelligence problems... The main sources of strategic culture are amongst others history, experience, political structure, myths and symbols, key texts, resources and technology. There are several main keepers of strategic culture such as elites, political institutions, public opinion, civil society, and popular culture.”

Ignoring for the moment the somewhat disturbing mimicry in details, the real problem with how Intelligence Studies tends to embrace grand strategic culture is that it is consistently defined to be basically all things and encompassing all groups. As intelligence scholars we not only falsely qualify our enthusiasm for the concept: we conduct research to get away from the so-called Anglosphere only to propose alternatives that are still stuck in the grand strategic tradition.

The important piece by Aldrich and Kasuku superbly affirms the somewhat spastic inconsistency with which the discipline tries to deal with culture. Beginning with the noble cause of freeing the West from its self-imposed constraint of an ethnocentric Anglo-Saxon conception of intelligence, the piece confesses to the difficulty of creating new models. What is missed is that this difficulty is based not just on a search for new models but for new ‘grand strategic cultural’ models, ones that aren’t ethnocentrically Anglo-Saxon. They admit that culture is a slippery concept but simultaneously acquiesce to the fact that the notion of ‘strategic cultures

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commands wide consensus.”¹³ This consensus seems to have a stranglehold on Intelligence Studies, which is only more frustrating when one considers how often the community claims to not be choking:

“Culture constrains how we think our intelligence institutions relate to a globalizing world, what tasks we think they should perform and what we think intelligence might be. In this wider sense, we are all potentially prisoners in the ethnocentric dungeon. Moreover, while there is an emerging consensus that we need to take account of culture in the study of national security policy, it has not yet had much impact in the realm of national intelligence communities…Culture is partly about difference, and each intelligence community has its own unique interface with national strategy. Appreciating the importance of associated norms and values is central to understanding how they function.”¹⁴

Again, allow a point of emphasis: these critiques are not trying to devalue the work of said scholars or question the importance of what they are contributing. Rather, it is meant to highlight the perplexing corner we seem to paint ourselves into when it comes to grand strategic culture and intelligence analysis. The very voices claiming culture’s uncertain impact within intelligence go on to produce research that is in fact an affirmation of culture’s power. Perhaps more problematic, our axiomatic acceptance of consensus is pushing ever higher a conceptualization of culture that is analytically omnivorous – devouring everything in sight and thus blocking any real effort to offer alternative explanations that are less grand, more organizational, and more empirically enlightening.

It is not that the literature is pure overemphasis on the causal power and universal applicability of grand strategic culture. Thankfully, there are other voices. There is a significant but small counter-literature that holds great promise in pushing less grand cultural theories of


¹⁴ Ibid. p.1016; 1027.
intelligence. Ironically, some of the works and authors I put into this category have already in the past been claimed by the other camp (see the aforementioned Davies). This is why this section is more reclamation than innovation: in some cases it will be seen that even the authors themselves (or scholars who cite the original works) do not notice the impact grand strategic culture has had on their thinking. Thus this literature exhibits some of the same confusion in the other camp. I try to clear away that confusion, unify what I call the organizational cultural conditions of intelligence analysis, and affirm its explanatory power for future analysts.

**Organizational ‘Conditions’ and Intelligence Studies: A Humble Foundation to Build Upon**

It did not take Security Studies long to take a moment to assess and rethink the explicit importance of cultural theories. The work of Desch and Johnston in the mid-late 1990s figures most prominently here as the cautionary warnings they issued to their discipline then seem eerily apropos to Intelligence Studies today. If Desch was most concerned with whether cultural theories could supplant realist theories (which he ultimately showed was not wise and at best should be used as supplements to traditional realist approaches), his numerous elaborations reveal an intriguing analogy.

First, for Desch, cultural variables were tricky to define and operationalize; second, some cultural theorists believed that cultural variables make every case sui generis, and so the theories cannot be broadly generalized or applicable across many cases; third, cultural theories did not outperform ‘hard cases’ in comparison to realist theories, which was essential if cultural approaches really were going to become the go-to approach in Security Studies. The dilemma for Desch of cultural vs. realist theories matches up well with my own concern about grand

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strategic cultures vs. organizational conditions. Grand strategic cultural approaches in Intelligence Studies today are flawed in almost exactly the same ways as the general cultural theories did for Desch in Security Studies back in the 90s. Perhaps more importantly for the Intelligence discipline, I am not sure we operate under the same crucial need that Desch did: Security Studies does indeed wish to produce general theories of security behavior while it is simply irrational to think a similar general theory of intelligence community behavior can or even should be developed. Regardless, Desch’s central problem with cultural theories, that they did not in fact provide better or more complete or more accurate explanatory power beyond existing theories, is the same problem I have with how Intelligence Studies scholars tend to use grand strategic cultural approaches to explain foreign intelligence community behavior: they are not better, nor more complete, nor provide more accurate explanations on behavior.

This analogy holds even more powerfully with the work of Johnston, whose mid-90s review of strategic culture revealed it to be both under-determined and over-determined and unable to offer a convincing research design for isolating its actual causal effects. Indeed, his caution that the link between strategic culture and behavior needed to be handled with extreme care because there had been no success in revealing a direct link between the two is powerful:

“Most of those who use the term ‘culture’ tend to argue, explicitly or implicitly, that different states have different predominant strategic preferences that are rooted in the early or formative experiences of the state, and are influenced to some degree by the philosophical, political, cultural, and cognitive characteristics of the state and its elites. Ahistorical or ‘objective’ variables such as technology, polarity, or relative materials capabilities are all of secondary importance. It is strategic culture, they argue, that gives meaning to these variables [but offer no real evidence to support the supposition.]”

17 Ibid. p.34
Recall the conceptualizations of grand strategic culture discussed earlier amongst Intelligence Studies scholars: if anything their definitions have evolved even beyond the versions that Desch and Johnston found so problematic in Security Studies fifteen years earlier, as they have grown to actually encapsulate the ahistorical or objective variables as well. With this acknowledged, the same critical flaw exposed by Desch and Johnston is exposed within Intelligence Studies: we use a definition of grand strategic culture that is not falsifiable, not even distinguishable from non-strategic culture variables (because we subsume those variables as well), and consequently we cannot provide an analytical calculus that compellingly shows the relationship between culture and behavioral choice. Thus our analyses, when based on grand strategic cultural approaches, will always be a bit too vague, a bit too deterministic, a bit too tautological (the French do that because they are French and the French have always been that way).

The fundamental problem with this is that it smacks a bit too perfectly with the concept of cognitive closure by Hatlebrekke and Smith, who argued brilliantly about the detrimental effect it can have specifically on intelligence analysis:

“It is helpful to understand cognitive closure as the force that manifests itself as assumptions, orthodoxies, and habits. Anything that questions or puts these assumptions, orthodoxies and habits under scrutiny, thus threatens established conceptions of the world. Cognitive closure is therefore a way in which humans protect themselves against any challenge to a secure and comforting understanding of the world.”

In a sense, I am arguing that this is exactly what happens with many intelligence scholars and analysts who rely too heavily on such grand strategic cultural theories. Their analyses are flexed through these assumptions and orthodoxies and ultimately color the end analytical product in a

manner that might undermine the true complexity of reality and therefore the accuracy of the investigation. Hatlebrekke and Smith rightly contended that intelligence organizations might be able to improve analysis by embracing the uncertainty of reality and resisted the urge to find solutions that would neatly fit inside of preconceived notions and predetermined orders of emphasis.\textsuperscript{20} In other words, an approach that emphasizes contemporary conditions, allows for competing, testable, and falsifiable variables, and embraces the complexity of an evolving and dynamic decision-making behavioral calculus will reduce the margins of error, increase the veracity of the end-product provided, and would avoid accusations of being dogmatic or tautological. Just such an approach is attempted in the concluding section here with a formula for ‘organizational intelligence conditions’ that tries to avoid the cognitive closure of grand strategic culture while providing a foundation upon which to analyze foreign intelligence communities.

Hume argued that custom is the dominant guide for human life. Hatlebrekke and Smith connected custom as one of the biggest dangers to human imagination and therefore one of the greatest dangers to accurate threat assessment.\textsuperscript{21} An approach that moves away from grand pronouncements about immutable culture best epitomizes the world intelligence communities actually operate in: one comprised of societies undergoing varieties of social, political, and economic adjustment, implying therefore that the threats faced and needing to be dealt with will always change, often dramatically.\textsuperscript{22} While change, especially rapid change, can be an inherently difficult thing for intelligence communities, the scholars who make up Intelligence Studies as a discipline should strive to craft explanatory approaches that do not suffer from the same problem. Our analytical approaches need to be highly adaptable, reflective, dynamic, and not

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid p.180
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid p.180
prone to ‘custom thinking’ or enduring orthodoxy. Failing to do that might not be evidence of how the world refuses to change but rather confirmation that we ourselves are victims of our own cognitive closure.

While there is no doubt that Intelligence Studies will always be a close cousin to Security Studies, with both researching many of the same problems and concerned about similar dangers and riddles, it is time for Intelligence Studies to acknowledge that riding the analytical coattails of Security Studies will not always lead it down the right path for its priorities. The massive literature in Security Studies about the multiple generations of strategic culture and its fierce internal debate is just that: an internal debate relevant to the conceptualizations and methodologies for Security Studies scholars and the world which they observe. That world is not the same as the one we observe within Intelligence Studies, nor do intelligence communities act and behave according to the exact same logic calculus as their standard subjects of investigation. We have not emphasized this enough and it has had an adverse effect on many of our analyses that deal with evaluating and understanding foreign intelligence communities.

Today Security Studies is undergoing a rearticulation of strategic cultural theory so that there will be greater urgency placed on the political practices of those involved in actual strategy. In other words, instead of arguing that certain states engage in specific behavior because of their unique and inherent strategic culture, many are calling for strategic cultural scholarship to engage in more critical analysis of its own assumptions and allow for greater investigations into the daily organizational minutiae that might impact modern strategy decisions more.\(^{23}\) If Security

Studies can do this, then Intelligence Studies certainly must do so as well. Doing so may stake a smaller explanatory space for our analyses, but they will be more accurate and reflective of how intelligence institutions actually formulate priorities and make decisions. This is something our discipline has hinted at for over a decade but few have risen to accept the challenge. If we do this, then the discipline itself will be taking a step away from using analytical buzzwords in the cultural domain. What the literature in Intelligence Studies shows about culture is an inconsistent, convoluted, and sometimes contradictory engagement. The dangers this causes theoretically-speaking for the discipline are significant. But there are also real consequences to empirical analysis, with the end-products created by practitioners for decision-makers. The following section shows how inconsistency and confusion in the analysis of intelligence communities weakens the discipline.

*Examining Foreign Intelligence Community Cultures: The Bipolarity of Intelligence Studies*

Common complaints within Intelligence Studies about the examination of foreign intelligence communities, especially those not residing in the west, run the gamut from being too historically driven to being completely ahistorical and thus nothing more than a simple organizational review of facts and details to being too often inevitably compared against a standard framework that uses either the United States or the United Kingdom as the backdrop.

While these analyses are all important, they have failed to look at how the competing

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conceptualizations of culture within the discipline engender entirely different approaches and therefore radically different conclusions about how we view and evaluate said communities. This section will give six ‘case glances’ of the phenomenon, three positive and three negative, involving China, North Korea, and Russia on the negative side and Romania, Turkey, and Spain on the positive. The cases are a mix between scholar- and practitioner-produced, thus showing this problem is not just the imagination of academics but has bled into the professional field as well. Perhaps most interesting and fairly unexpected was how states that play a bigger role on the global stage in terms of security affairs seem to be hurt more analytically by grand strategic culture and are often never analyzed from the perspective of organizational cultural conditions.

**Russian Federation**

Despite every effort by officials within the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War to decry a new foreign policy strategy and to instigate new relations based on ideas of multipolarity and balanced global power, most American analyses of Russia cannot seem to get past characterizing every Russian maneuver and interest in a grand strategic cultural way. When this is done Russia is inevitably seen as aspiring to new ‘great power’ status or attempting to reconstitute Soviet glory or is subconsciously beholden to an autocratic instinct that dates even further back, either to the czars or even back to Byzantium.\(^\text{27}\)

This type of cognitive closure is detrimental to American intelligence and diplomacy because it is purposefully limiting the potential frames of engagement between the two sides. In

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many ways the United States, both in terms of its scholarship and diplomatic efforts, has blindly created self-fulfilling prophecies when it comes to the Russian Federation because of a repeated inability to see past its own reliance on grand strategic culture as the chief defining point for understanding Russians. This is what led outstanding scholars like Samuel Huntington as early as 1993 to make statements like, ‘if, as the Russians stop behaving like Marxists, they reject liberal democracy and begin behaving like Russians but not like Westerners, the relations between Russia and the West could again become distant and conflictual.’

It is in the same vein that scholars seem to think the modern-day has no real relevance on understanding Russian foreign policy and intelligence/national security prioritization. This incredulous overreliance on ancient culture, where scholars and practitioners alike believe the roots of all Russian decisions in 2014 require an understanding of the Russian soul from 500, even 1000, years before, leads American analysts down a rabbit hole of quasi-mysticism and vague truisms. This is why so many Russian intelligence officials scoff at American analysis, whether it is from the ivory tower or Foggy Bottom.

“Of the organization of the Soviet and subsequent Russian state we can draw no specific indication of Byzantine bureaucratic organization, but in spirit the way the Soviets organized their government for security purposes is still quite Russian...What is being argued here is that the way the Byzantines managed their security and intelligence was a function of the political culture of the state, the same political culture that was inherited later by the Kievan and then Russian state, and which has served the Soviet and subsequent post-Soviet Russian state.”

The above is not being singled out for it is truly an exemplar of the kind of analysis that passes for grand strategic culture when examining Russia. Not only are the arguments non-scientific,

they are ultimately spurious: these analyses are not trying to ascertain the true motivations of contemporary Russian intelligence decisions. Rather they are trying to make sure Russia stays within the frame that already exists. This is cognitive closure at its worst: where the question ‘why do they do what they do?’ transforms instead into ‘what kind of Russia do we want and how do we make sure it becomes that and that alone?’ Grand strategic cultural thinking on Russian intelligence reveals relatively little about modern Russian thinking for American analysts, but it reveals a wealth of information on American thinking for Russian analysts.

**North Korea**

Some of the more interesting analyses on North Korea are coming out of the Korean peninsula itself, from native scholars with a large personal stake in the future of the Hermit Kingdom. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to see how the pervasive impact of grand strategic culture has filtered all the way out:

“[To understand North Korea’s threat perception, we] will apply the concept of strategic culture, which refers to the way a nation’s traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements, and methods of environmental adaptation [in the face of] threat and use of force…These beliefs and values emanate from such fundamental influences as geopolitical setting, history, and political culture. They collectively constitute a strategic culture that persists over time and influences the formation and execution of strategy.”

As discussed earlier, the problem begins with the analytical tendency to define strategic culture in such a way that it becomes basically a witches’ brew of so many divergent variables that one can explain absolutely everything while literally proving nothing. If anything, the definition of strategic culture above goes even further than some of the earlier definitions elaborated here in

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American academia. But unlike many in America, there seems to be the greater possibility of moving away from grand strategic culture, partially because of the frustration felt by many that it tends to leave little flexibility for new engagement or alternative realities based on actual empirical evidence. In North Korea’s case, some are starting to discuss the concept of ‘comprehensive security’ as something to incorporate ‘low politics’ and focus on specific daily tasks and issue areas.33

This is really nothing but semantics as the elaboration of comprehensive security is eerily similar to the approach endorsed here as organizational cultural conditions. What is most important is to see how Korean scholars and practitioners are declaring ‘strategic culture’ as simply being too rigid and constraining when what is most readily needed is an approach that allows the dynamic complexity of reality to actually have more causal sway. The failure to engage such new approaches is rightfully seen as dooming the peninsula to intelligence analysis that is going to be stubbornly self-fulfilling or a vicious circle of negative geopolitical, historical, and ideological legacies.34

China

Interestingly, unlike on the Korean peninsula, many Chinese scholars are still heavily enthralled by the power of grand strategic culture as an explanation for national security behavior. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any subtle nuance to how the Chinese embrace the concept compared to the Americans. Consequently, Chinese analysis of its own national security and intelligence community tends to be somewhat incoherent at the worst and simply cliché at best:

33 Yong-Pyo Hong, ‘North Korea’s Strategic Culture and Threat Perception: Implications for Regional Security Cooperation,’ Korea Observer 42/1 (2011) p.111.
34 Ibid p. 110-111.
“China has a long history with 5000 years of splendid civilization…the year 1840 is a turning point of not only ancient China’s history but also ancient China’s national security. In the same way, the year 1949 is another turning point for China’s national security…Contemporary China is a continuation of historical China…China’s national security is deeply affected by her traditional culture and history…China is accustomed to a set philosophy and standard rules in which to engage and watch the world…This impacts Chinese thinking, judgment, behavior, as well as influences China’s concept of national security…”

Informally this can be called the Sun-Tzu syndrome: there should be a challenge in academia for a scholar covering Chinese security and intelligence to write an article without somehow using a direct quote or reference to Sun-Tzu as the catch-all explanation of how to properly understand the Chinese world view. Again, keep in mind the important distinction made here between Security Studies, where such grand cultural legacies can and should enter the thinking of scholars, and Intelligence Studies, where more pragmatic analyses based on corporate organizational thinking is likely to be more powerful for understanding the machinations of intelligence agencies. The goal here is to not derisively dismiss strategic culture as a concept for all of academia. Rather it is to illustrate how often it gets improperly overused within our specific discipline and it subsequently hinders the power and accuracy of our analyses.

These three ‘case glances’ reveal a rather stark tendency: countries that have a major role to play on the global stage (both in negative and positive terms when it comes to security and intelligence) seem to be stuck in the grand strategic cultural trap. Sometimes this trap is set by others (Russia’s case). Other times this trap is largely set by the countries themselves (North Korea’s and China’s cases). Regardless, the end analytical result is the same: we are often left

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35 Chen Ou, ‘The Characteristics of China’s National Security,’ *Journal of Politics and Law* 4/1 (2011) pp. 84; 92. It should be noted that this native piece suffered from poor written English. I took the liberty of cleaning up the grammar and proper flow of the English language to make the point of the author more coherent to native English readers. In no way was the substantive content or analytical argument of the original author changed or degraded.
reading diatribes about ancient wisdoms and historical ghosts that can never be exorcised and yet do not seem to reveal very much empirical insight on actual contemporary intelligence reality within said countries. The following three cases all involve ‘lesser’ countries in terms of their global prominence with security and intelligence. How they differ proves quite interesting for the arguments being made here.

**Spain**

Somehow Spain has managed to avoid the ‘curse of Isabelle and Ferdinand’ when it comes to how it evaluates its own intelligence community. In Spain’s case there is remarkable focus on what this work is calling the organizational cultural conditions and as a result Spanish analysis tends to be more dynamic, adaptable, and empirically engaged.

“Spain’s IC represents a clear problem of articulation which prevents it from becoming a satisfactory instrument for elaborating the country’s foreign and security policy. The existing legal framework in Spain enables a plurality of formations and evolutions so that in principle there is no need for a new legal regulation; there is, however, an urgent need for reflection at the highest level on the model of community that Spain needs and wants, and its consequent formalization so that all the actors involved will know what kind of model the Executive wants, the role to be played by each actor and the mechanisms to be followed for its coordination and control.”

The differentiation in language, focus, and execution of analysis could not be more dramatic. There is no kvetching about lost empire or the need to somehow honor the enduring spiritual debt of the Spanish Armada. And make no mistake: the manner in which grand strategic cultural analysis transpires demands this kind of language. If Russia is dependent on the legacy of the Byzantine Empire and China is hard-pressed to move beyond the ideas of Sun-Tzu, then it is simply hypocritical to not make Spain beholden to the same type of historical and cultural

legacies. And yet, these native scholars are not beholden to it. It seems that they barely give such considerations a passing thought. And they shouldn’t. What is the main concern here when analyzing the contemporary formulation and future of the Spanish intelligence community is to consider laws, human agents, organizations, contemporary security priorities, and the complex dynamic interplay between the various vested stakeholders.

When the focus remains tight on these organizational cultural conditions, scholarship tends to be more empirically accurate, capable of being tested by others, and open to change (a constant in today’s world of intelligence community operation). The previous three cases, all overly dependent on determining and emphasizing grand strategic culture, lacked all of these qualities and as a result produced analytical results that were less than inspiring. And it does not seem that this will be unique, but rather a repeatable trend when comparing grand strategic cultural analyses against organizational cultural condition analyses.

**Turkey**

If anything, Turkey only intensifies the characteristics seen in the Spanish case. Studying Turkish intelligence tends to be dominated by the ever-changing current and future developments of the Turkish state. Rather than trying to adhere to some ancient tract that demands a particular mindset and behavioral tactic, Turkish intelligence by default must be ready to always adjust and adapt to the unpredictable domestic and foreign policy winds.

“What intelligence is the Turkish intelligence community interested in? First and foremost, it is concerned with any intelligence that would contribute to national security and public safety. A second interest is solid intelligence that would support Turkey’s active role and interest in balancing the influence of Iran and Russia in the Balkan, Middle Eastern, and Caucasian triangle, which is the primary focus of Turkey’s regional security policies. Third, it is seeking good
quality foreign intelligence to allow the government to have a modicum of international influence.”

Just as with Spain, Turkey emphasizes the NOW when it evaluates and assesses its intelligence community. There is no point in droning on about the legacy of the Ottoman Empire or the spirit of Ataturk or what it historically means to be the Western-Eastern crossroads for humanity. These cultural and historical legacies matter if you are a Turk, no doubt. But they do not explicitly and powerfully impact Turkish intelligence as it watches what happens in Syria, or tries to decide how to respond to the Islamic State, or considers various overtures from the United States, Israel and the EU on hindering Iranian nuclear development, or grows weary about a strengthening Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq.

Grand strategic cultural approaches have very little to say to these real-time contemporary priorities. And it is these priorities that occupy the thinking of Turkish intelligence today. So analysis that wants to properly assess and evaluate the decision-making calculus of Turkish intelligence is much better equipped by focusing on the organizational cultural conditions that demand so much of the attention, budget, and leadership of Turkish intelligence. The explanatory power of these analyses is not just in the details, but in the substantive relevance engaged when not shackled by ancient historical and cultural legacies that make for wonderful bedtime stories but not very prescient intelligence analysis.

**Romania**

Fascinatingly, Romania seems to be a state that has actually adopted organizational cultural conditions not as an academic approach for intelligence analysis but as an actual

corporate philosophy for its intelligence community. It has recently pushed for an emphasis on developing the cognitive skills of its agents, seeking to formalize an educational reform program that will produce intelligence leaders that have ‘deep and flexible multidimensional thinking.’ The reasoning behind this push is that Romanian intelligence believes that the ability to produce creative solutions to complex operational and strategic problems will be hugely impactful for reducing its future conflicts. Most impressively, Romanian intelligence has made a direct causal link between organizational culture and proper cognitive functioning that should quite frankly be the envy of Intelligence Studies scholars:

“The specific cognitive skills require critical evaluation of the results of new research, the formulation of alternative understandings and the demonstration of relevance, including the creative application of research methods and the design and management of domain-specific processes…The fundamentals of organizational culture [that we apply to future intelligence officers] should be based on the progressive transformation of our leaders so that we institutionalize such training in terms of conceptual and decision-making factors so that we exhibit interdisciplinary thinking that is fast, adaptable, proactive, open, flexible, and unconventional…”

The last sentence above epitomizes why this approach emphasizing organizational cultural conditions as superior to any grand strategic cultural concerns for Intelligence Studies is because this description is not unique to Romanian intelligence. On the contrary, it is almost an axiom: ANY intelligence community operating around the world today would testify to the importance of being fast, adaptable, proactive, flexible, etc. It is the failure to be such things that so often leads to intelligence failure. So it should not be surprising that the failure to be that within Intelligence Studies also leads to faulty or imprecise intelligence research.

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40 Ibid p.172.
These case glances were not meant to be exhaustive case studies. This work is not an in-depth investigation into the intelligence communities of Russia, North Korea, China, Spain, Turkey, and Romania. What these cases did powerfully expose, however, is the dramatic difference in analytical end-product when you choose between the two competing conceptualizations of culture the discipline has endorsed. An emphasis on grand strategic culture will actually make for better reading, as you will inevitably be taken down a road of the most interesting and intense historical and cultural impacts, possibly going back thousands of years. Organizational cultural conditions will instead leave you diving into budget concerns, internal turf wars over specific issue-areas, and the changing dynamics of micro-subjects that might not even make the paper, let alone a history text. But those conditions are the things that reveal the most about the contemporary prioritizing of intelligence communities, much more so than fascinating turns down history lane. More importantly, there seems to be a disconnect in our discipline where the more important security/intelligence countries are dominated by grand strategic cultural analyses. Perhaps that is a reason we seem to make so little headway in better understanding those impactful intelligence communities like China, Russia, and North Korea.

*Glimmers of Hope for the ‘Lesser Culture:’ New Research into Intelligence Transformation*

While this work has shown how quickly cognitive closure can occur within grand strategic cultural approaches in intelligence analysis, both from a scholarly and practitioner perspective, both within the United States and far beyond it, hopefully it has also shown that there are counter-approaches being developed to wean Intelligence Studies off of its overreliance. At the moment these approaches are disparate and terminologically diverse, which actually prevents scholars from realizing they are working within the same school of thought and therefore has robbed such research of greater influence within the discipline. But there have been
in the last half dozen years the beginnings of amalgamation on this front between the scholarly and professional intelligence communities which one hopes will continue to grow and advance. This effort, if successful, will emphasize the power of intelligence analysis founded upon organizational cultural conditions rather than grand strategic cultures and focusing purpose-based decision-making rather than ideologically or historically predetermined thought processes.

The work of an intelligence community is by default messy. Not only does it normally have to tackle extremely diverse, even radically contradictory, threats and forces, it usually has to deal with an internal bureaucracy that is equally complex and messy, highly compartmentalized.\(^{41}\) It is surprising, therefore, that the effort to focus on increasing structural efficiency to improve intelligence analysis is really not that old within the discipline. Hammond was one of the first to examine the creation, post-9/11, of purpose-based centers that were intended to ensure the integration and coordination of terrorism-related information held anywhere within the intelligence community.\(^{42}\) But as was seen in Spain and Turkey and Romania, there is a problem here with semantics: purpose-based is really nothing more than a shift toward emphasizing organizational cultural conditions over grand strategic theory. It is the reincorporation of daily foci and evolving priorities to a place of prominence in the evaluation of an intelligence community.

This same effort (while not actually recognizing it as such) occurred just two years after Hammond’s work in 2009 at Harvard’s Kennedy School with the Defense Leadership Project. What was born out of the so-called frustration with leadership within the US Intelligence Community (characterized as routinely being ill-equipped to understand, visualize, or respond


\(^{42}\) Ibid pp.419-421.
effectively to the *modern security environment*) ultimately found the solution to the problem in adaptation. As mentioned above, a significant problem hindering the power of these approaches is the failure to realize how much they are constitution the debate discussed here about the competing conceptualizations of culture. Cognitive closure caused by a dependence on grand strategic culture is what causes leadership to be ill-equipped to understand the modern environment. This is because grand strategic culture does not try to evolve or be agile with contemporary realities: it tries to sledgehammer the messy complexity of reality neatly into its own historically predetermined boxes.

The fact that the Defense Leadership Project ultimately concluded that individual adaptability, creativity, and intellectual agility was the key to the IC’s future without recognizing it as an actual plea to analytically shift towards organizational cultural conditions does not change the significance. Its argument imploring the ‘national intelligence community to ensure that its workforce achieves the right balance between agency expertise and interagency experience…and to examine its career workforce mobility and define community-wide standards of performance and skills’ is at its very core what an approach to intelligence analysis via organizational cultural conditions does.

This is what partly accounts for the intellectual frustration: there seem to be many fine scholars, professional, think tanks, and institutes all tackling the same basic premise of improved intelligence and decreased analytical failure, and coming to remarkably coordinated conclusions, only to not have any sense of being part of a larger community. To a large extent this piece is

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44 Ibid p.19;25.
trying to affirm Immerman’s work on transforming analysis and supports his classification of this effort as something more than just a random series of chance scholarly encounters:

“The movement, and it is a movement, to reform and thereby improve intelligence analysis goes by the title Analytic Transformation…Analytic Transformation’s goal is as simple as it is dramatic: to get the right analysis to the right people at the right time, in a form they can use. The strategy is equally commonsensical: to transform the analytic component of our community from a federation of agencies, or a collection of feudal baronies, into a community of analysts.”

The cacophony of diverse terms continues. These incredible efforts to overcome feudal baronies, ill-equipped leadership, and face more efficiently a complex messy reality are intensified and improved by a switch to the ‘lesser culture.’ It is indeed in many ways commonsensical: as Immerman attested to, the transition from bipolarity to globalization in the intelligence world has meant a switch to new phenomena, challenges, and threats, many of which are asymmetrical, obscure, highly evolving, non-traditional, and fast moving. The Analytic Transformation ‘movement’ highlighted above is perhaps accomplished more readily and more easily by focusing on organizational cultural conditions. These various groups are already speaking the language of the approach without even realizing it. If we really want a movement, then the switch to the ‘lesser culture’ will surely deliver it.

**Conclusion: Stepping Out of the Shadow of Security Studies**

The problem with how Intelligence Studies embraced grand strategic culture is one of short-sightedness, or perhaps even an inferiority complex. We adopted its usage exactly as it was employed within Security Studies without ever asking the relevant questions about whether or not this concept functions for intelligence as well as it does for security and if it does not might

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46 Ibid p.165.
the discipline not be better off pursuing other analytical avenues? By not asking those questions we missed the simple reality that Intelligence Studies as a discipline is not a simple off-shoot of Security Studies, and as such what works for scholars there will not necessarily work well for scholars here. Grand strategic cultural approaches in intelligence analysis promote cognitive closure in its analysts. Such closure can be incredibly agile and nefarious and there are two final examples to share to illustrate how: the American intelligence reaction to the rise of radical Islam in the 1990s, specifically Al-Qaeda, and the current conflict today in Eastern Ukraine. Examining these two incidents will show not only how easy it is to be really smart in intelligence and still fail but also how that failure never comes in the same predictable guise.

There are numerous 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 represented 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 America’s national myopia on this issue can be cogently explained by its over-reliance on grand strategic culture, which dictated that America was impervious to any external terrorist threat. This is only more bitterly ironic (and affirmation of how psychologically deep grand strategic cultural blindness can go) given that the ‘failed’ 1993 World Trade Center attack was a failure simply because it did not succeed in leveling the building. Analysts seem to have ignored the ‘success’ of actually gaining access to the building and detonating an explosive device within its grounds. If intelligence analysts had focused on the more organizational cultural conditions, then all of the aforementioned information could have gained greater focus and relevance and the ‘success’ aspect of the 1993 operation would have triggered much greater investigation.
This analytical blind spot has been documented for some time but not connected to cognitive closure. Studies going as far back as Pearl Harbor have shown that the country attacked has almost always had in its possession ample early intelligence that, given a different analytical approach and mindset, would have enabled the possibility of setting up a defense or counterintelligence operation. And while Intelligence Studies as a discipline has not viewed the rise of Al-Qaeda in the 90s from this perspective, it seems rather powerful in explaining why the relevance of so much was not missed but simply ignored: the first 1993 attack; the official OBL declaration of war against the United States in the mid-1990s; and the FBI’s failure to follow-up on reports about Arab men taking flight school in America without showing any interest in learning how to land jumbo jets in the simulators.

The conflict in Ukraine today is still massively misconstrued and misinformed in the West. Once again, over-reliance on grand strategic culture pushes the problem. Fascinatingly, it shows how quickly it can lead an analyst down odd paths. First, grand strategic culture will make those in the West believe there could never be conflict between Ukraine and Russia. After all, Russia cites its own cultural beginning from the Kievan Rus. But once the conflict in Eastern Ukraine began in earnest, grand strategic cultural thinking quickly discarded this original doubt and moved on to embrace the next version: one 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.

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

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were already in place and meant to be enforced when the Maidan revolution took place in Kiev 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 proceeded to Crimea and across Eastern Ukraine. The failure of the West to understand this or to continue to push an ‘analysis’ that actually forces recalcitrance and indignation from the Russian side is damning indication of how grand strategic culture within Intelligence Studies simply forces analysts to think too often in limited, stereotypical, and highly polarizing ways and produce intelligence product that does not help decision-makers but may actually exacerbate a conflict situation.

The reason this piece started with a call for a Deschian intervention in Intelligence Studies was because of the discipline’s failure to notice some of its own analytical missteps as concerned evaluating foreign intelligence communities and an apparent lack of initiative to differentiate itself more fully from Security Studies. But the full investigation into the flaws of grand strategic culture as a powerful intelligence tool has shown the need to be more critical. The idea of developing an approach more akin to corporate organizational culture, focusing on purpose-driven, complex, dynamic reality, and allowing intelligence communities to adapt and change already exists but needs to be pushed more to the forefront. This approach brings to Intelligence Studies not only more accurate end-products but it also begins to set a separate analytical space on the stage apart from Security Studies. This differentiation would be good for both disciplines and would also make Intelligence Studies more readily seen as a distinct and fully-developed academic discipline.