More Strategists, Less Strategy

The Case for a European Defense University

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Strategic Culture, Epistemic Communities and Military Education: How to Construct a Strategic Culture?

Biscop argued recently that the EU has a tendency to avoid strategic debates even though as a foreign policy actor it must make strategic decisions. As a result, he observed, it has a tendency to improvise ad hoc strategies when a crisis emerges. In other words, lacking thought-out policy priorities and strategies, EU strategic behavior tends to be reactive rather than proactive. Biscop defines strategy as “a tool at the service of policy-making [...] starting from the fundamental values of the policy-maker and the interests that are vital to upholding those values [...] The result is a long-term reference framework for short-term, day-to-day policy-making in a rapidly evolving and complex environment – a guide for strategic behavior”. The current article accepts Biscop’s arguments and his suggestion that the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) would benefit from more investment in strategic debates and pursuit of strategic development (Biscop, 2012: 1). However, it diverges as to the how. This article makes two arguments: first, the EU does not need to construct a wholly new or common EU strategic culture. Instead it is necessary
for a cohort of high-ranking security-related civilian and military officials to communicate and build upon existing shared threads of strategic culture. Only then would a European security oriented worldview be feasible. Second, the best way to achieve this goal is through the establishment of a European Defense University to educate personnel to help promote the culture.

King (King, 2005), following Tonra (Tonra, 2003), suggests that the way to make the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) more robust is for EU member states to believe that the mutual benefits of cooperation far outweigh the costs of giving up some of their sovereignty or opting out of the cooperative group. This kind of community feeling corresponds well to the characteristics of strategic culture on the European level. The importance of developing and institutionalizing a European strategic culture is recognized by scholars and practitioners alike. Both groups agree that this foundation of common interests, values, priorities, threat perceptions and similar traits is required to move European defense cooperation beyond its current concentration on capabilities and roles. Meyer defined ‘strategic culture’ as comprising “[…] deep-seated norms, beliefs, and ideas about a state’s role in the world, its perception of security threats, and the legitimate means and ends for the use of force”.

Meyer admitted that European strategic cultures remained distinct but found a growing convergence among them regarding the declining importance of territorial defense after the end of the Cold War; the need for and legitimacy of humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping; an increased role for the UN, including authorizing the use of military force; and a general preference for civil policy rather than military instruments (Krotz & Maher, 2011: 565-566).

A number of scholars have traced the epistemological and ontological evolution of the study of culture in strategic affairs (Haglund, 2011).

It is generally agreed that there were three ‘waves’ of scholars who either used ‘culture’ as an explanatory variable to explain changes in foreign and defense policies or discussed ‘strategic culture’ directly. Implicit in some of the current works is criticism of earlier conceptions of a ‘strategic culture’ as too monolithic. Especially among those studying the development of a European strategic culture, the growing tendency is to suggest models presenting subcultures/units, thus increasing its potential to serve as an explanatory variable. The reason is that the power of one sub-culture/unit vis-à-vis others can change quickly. That in turn may explain why strategic culture changes. These changes require much less time and are more probable than dramatic develop-
Among the recent breakthroughs in developing more dynamic models, special attention should be paid to the work of Schmitt. He argues that strategic culture serves as a referent for decision-makers. He believes that when faced with conflicting pressures from domestic electorates and the international environment they explicitly use facets of their own strategic culture to legitimize their decisions. However, under certain circumstances they may decide to violate their own strategic culture, as they are not bound by it. In doing so they use a specific discourse strategy and justify that approach based on a distinct facet of their own strategic culture. From a theoretical perspective, his study improves the understanding of strategic culture by demonstrating its multifaceted nature and its potential strategic use by decision-makers.

Strategic culture constructs a set of appropriate behavioral norms that actors should adopt. Because it is a ‘set of norms’, we cannot think of strategic culture in monolithic terms. Instead it is composed of various facets, some of which may be mutually enhancing or conflicting. The current study continues this line of inquiry and follows Schmitt’s suggestion to focus on the role of agency in the shaping of strategic culture (Schmitt, 2012: 59-60). The study conceptualizes strategic culture as consisting of sub-units, i.e. sub-cultures, each of which has a distinctive identity. These are elite groups focusing on real world problems with distinct conceptions of foreign policy issues. This conception results from a specific epistemic community which controls that sub-culture. This line of argumentation relies on the exploration conducted by Eyal and Bucholz, who tried to explain the transformation of ‘sociology of intellectuals’ into ‘sociology of intervention’ (Eyal & Bucholz, 2010: 118). The main difference is that the units of analysis of the former focus on a specific social type, i.e. intellectuals. The unit of analysis for the latter, in contrast, is the movement of intervention and therefore it focuses on how expertise acquires value in the form of public interventions (ibid.: 119-120).

In essence, the ideal type intellectual referred to a specific manifestation of political agency: the ability to use a universalist-critical form of public involvement and interventions. However, Eyal and Bucholz argued that the more interesting thinkers recognized a need for what they termed “mediating concepts”. These paved the way, in their words, for “a more probabilistic, relational, and eventual mode of explanation”. This was most evident in the writings of Bourdieu who replaced the concept of ‘class’ with ‘field’ and
Foucault who exchanged ideas/truth for ‘discourse’. According to Eyal and Bucholz the result of the movement emerging from this scholarship in the 21st century is a “movement, the maneuver by which a historically specific truth-producing practice becomes an effective tool of intervention in the public sphere” (ibid.: 123).

A major step in this direction was the expanding body of knowledge regarding intellectual fields. It extended classical research beyond a concentration on intellectuals’ loyalties and political behavior. Due to its relational methodology, it refrained from an a priori definition of intellectuals through essentialist characteristics, focusing instead on their representation by reconstructing the space in which intellectual attributions and related values are produced and contrasted. An important measure was the extension of analytical attention from national to international perspectives, which was relatively rare beforehand. More recent approaches focus even more on public intervention as the unit of analysis and concentrate on the social construction of scientific knowledge into expertise (ibid.: 124-128).

This helps us to rethink our conception of strategic culture. It can be understood as a response to policy issues through the social construction of a distinctive expert group whose claim for legitimacy relies on its expert knowledge. Defining a given strategic culture as the result of public intervention makes it possible to use the concept of ‘epistemic community’. An epistemic community is distinguished from disciplines and professions by its relatively small size and the fact that its members share principled beliefs and values. It is defined by a combination of stated truths and a public moral attitude. It also tries to show how the movement from ideas to public intervention can occur even in a contested global arena. However, at the same time, epistemic communities are also perceived as networks that formulate tools for effective intervention. The epistemic communities approach emphasizes the ability to unite rival groups and translate their interests in a way that facilitates communication and compromise among different groups (ibid.: 128-131).

These communities develop in response to the need of policy makers for specific kinds of information. The communities compete for hegemony. Members of a community that is ‘victorious’ become powerful actors on the national and international levels as decision makers seek the community’s advice and solidify its authority. The advice given by the community is informed by its wider worldview. Where the epistemic community holds bureaucratic power within national administrations and international secretar-
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its influence is institutionalized and its views become embedded in broader international politics (Haas, 1992: 4).

The current study suggests that in security affairs, epistemic communities construct sub-(strategic) cultures which compete for hegemonic position within the strategic culture. Therefore strategic culture should not be conceived as part of the wider culture but as a culture of strategists. That culture includes public intervention of a community of experts when policymakers need information. Once a sub-culture reflecting the work of an epistemic community becomes hegemonic; its worldview can shape the entire strategic culture for as long as it maintains its power. The suggested model treats strategic culture as an intermediate variable explaining the influence of epistemic communities that win hegemony over other sub-cultures, in terms of the expertise, values and attitudes of strategists. We suggest that the hegemonic epistemic community controls the socialization of senior officers (who are responsible for the military dimensions of strategic culture) in terms of their worldview and influence on strategic behavior and policy preferences. The model looks at the military education system as the ‘space’ within which the communities compete for hegemony. The identity of the sub-culture which controls the activity within this ‘space’ is the intermediate variable that decides the result of the competition between the sub-cultures, i.e. epistemic communities. To understand why military education is an arena within which the competition is decided we need to turn to the ‘officership as a profession’ school of thought within the field of civil-military relations.

The basic characteristic that distinguishes a profession from an occupation is the existence of a theoretical body of knowledge and the practical skills deriving from it. Laymen not commissioned as members of the profession will find it difficult to acquire the knowledge and skills unique to it – creating an effective professional monopoly. Professional communities seek to maintain their monopoly through such means as control of recruitment and selection of candidates for membership in the profession, and establishing criteria for promotion (Downes, 1985: 148). Huntington maintained that the military profession is distinguished from other professions in its reliance on a theoretical body of knowledge and a derivative skill-set – a monopoly on the knowledge and skills related to the “management of violence” (Huntington, 1957: 11). It is suggested here that military education institutions are means by which the hegemonic epistemic community embeds strategists in the social-constructing strategic culture. Therefore, the main role of professional military educational...
institutions is to equip officers with expert knowledge, ethics, values and the
sense of unity unique to the profession (Masland & Radway, 1957: 55; Evans,
2007).

Testing the Model: The Baltic Defense College and
Construction of the Baltic Defense College

The three Baltic States, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, belong to the group of
post-communist states that won their independence when the USSR collapsed.
Unlike most of the Warsaw pact states, however, they lacked armed forces,
and had to develop their structures, doctrines and strategic culture from
scratch. They chose to base their development on the common promotion of
national aims. One of the major factors in their willingness to cooperate was
their continuing concerns about Russia. Additionally, they agreed that their
applications to membership in NATO would be enhanced through military
coordination. They also developed a regional, i.e., Baltic strategic culture with
the consistent, expensive and continuous support of foreign states. That
support was based on a worldview of a security-focused transatlantic epistemic
community. The aim was to gain international cooperation with the Baltic
States with the ultimate goal of integrating them within the EU and NATO
(Foot, 2003: 9-11).

A cornerstone of this enterprise was the establishment of the Baltic Defense
College to educate officers at the ranks of captain to major. The initiative was
made possible by massive international backing, including the assignment of a
strong international faculty from non-Baltic states. The long-term aim was to
transfer operation of the college to the Baltic States. (Foot, 2001: 119-120). In
terms of the model suggested above, the college serves as a hub of the epistemic
community of the regional and international supporting states. It is a center of
strategic thinking and doctrinal development, multi-national exercises,
enhancement of democratic control over armed forces, implementation of civil-
military decision making and officer corps professionalization (Foot, 2003:
12). Foot emphasized that colleges like the Baltic model could promote
regional security only if the highest level of political consensus existed between
the regional states and their international supporters (Foot, 2001: 124). In
other words all sides had to share a common worldview, i.e. the product of a
hegemonic epistemic community.
In the summer 1997 when the final decision to establish the college was made, it was decided to base the curriculum on the Territorial Defense concept shared by the three states. In other words, territorial defense was a worldview promoted by the epistemic community that supported establishment of the college as a means of promoting regional defense cooperation. It also relied on the social capital and prestige of the successful Nordic sponsors of the college, who had used this model for decades.

During the first year and a half of the college’s existence, the founding faculty reached common agreement about developing a curriculum to socialize Baltic officers in that concept. The result of their work was an edited edition of the College Operations Manual and tactical exercises were used to teach Total Defense (Clemmesen, 2000: 83-84). The first Commandant of the College, Michael Clemmesen, a Danish Brigadier General who was assigned as part of his country’s commitment to support the Baltic States, claimed that the college reached an understanding about adopting the Total Defense concept. He added that “as the development of this concept is of crucial importance to development of the overall structure and concept of the defense forces of all three states, it is only natural that the Baltic Defense College is a focal point for developing such doctrine” (ibid.: 86). This is a rare admission of the focal position played by the college in immersing the regional military elite in the worldview of an epistemic community that shaped the regional strategic culture, in this case the Total Defense epistemic community.

Until 1999, the basis of operational teaching was Territorial Defense, especially in terms of the defense of capitals against a possible Russian strategic coup. This was inspired by Swedish and Finnish ideas of Total Defense. Focusing a young strategic culture on the worldview of the Total Defense epistemic community served to achieve two objectives: first, professionalization of the officer corps and increased tri-state coordination; and second, coordinating the national needs of three states within a regional context which included Sweden and Finland – the two major sponsors of the college.

The aspiration to gain NATO membership heightened tension between national and regional security and diverted the Baltic armed forces from the
Total Defense concept. Gradually NATO requirements took priority over national and regional demands. In terms of the model suggested, these tensions between Total Defense and NATO orientations reflect the struggle for hegemony over the Baltic strategic culture. The closer the Baltic States came to NATO membership the more oriented the curriculum became toward NATO doctrines and concepts. It was enhanced by the inclusion of foreign students from the US, Canada, Great Britain, Denmark, Holland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Norway (Foot, 2003: 13-15). As noted, the rise to power of the NATO-oriented epistemic group within the Baltic region was reflected in the refocusing of the college’s worldview. An illustration of the strengthening NATO-oriented epistemic community was the establishment of a higher level officer education course dedicated to transforming the forces for NATO (Clemmesen, 2004: 13).

An illustration of the college’s ability to instill the worldview of a specific hegemonic epistemic community within the strategic culture is the high ranking, influential positions its graduates hold. Data available about graduates from 2000-2003 indicate that roughly half of the Baltic students filled important positions in Central Staff. About one-third held operational positions, often in command positions or chief of staff; the remainder served in training and educational positions. Another finding was that the three states used the graduates in a similar manner (Foot, 2003: 16).3

Developing Strategists, not Strategy:
The case for a European Defense University

Based on the model presented in the first section of the article, and the case study of the Baltic Defense College’s usefulness for analyzing how strategic culture can be constructed and enhanced through military education, this section will discuss how European strategic culture could be developed by the establishment of a European Defense University. As argued above, it is assumed that the main problem of the EU in regard to strategy is not a lack of institutional apparatus or policy documents. Rather it is the lack of a cohesive cohort of strategists who share a common worldview regarding the union’s

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3 In Foot’s original phrasing: “Central Staff 53%; Operations 30%; Training 15%, with 2% uncategorized”. See Footnote 20 (Foot, 2003: 19).
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foreign and security perspectives. The Baltic States used their Baltic Defense College to construct, enhance and change their regional strategic culture.

Despite sharp theoretical and empirical debates about European strategic culture, indications can be found that some common ground has been achieved. An emerging body of scholarship indicates a trend toward convergence or Europeanization of military strategies and doctrines among EU member state armed forces, in the form of CSDP core functionality, i.e. the ‘crisis management’ concept. Venesson et al. argue that each of the European national armed forces maintains its own distinct ways of war and no one ‘European’ way of war exists. However, they do discern a convergence of military doctrines toward crisis management and peacekeeping missions. They suggest that over time a European convergence might arise around a ‘crisis management core’ but that would be possible only by leaving the exact definition of ‘crisis management’ in a cloud of constructive ambiguity. This would allow each actor to interpret the concept in ways that best fit its needs and capabilities (Vennesso et al., 2009: 640).

It is suggested that the findings of Venesson et al. could serve as the core for developing an epistemic community on the European level that would further evolve CSDP strategies. This could be done through discussions held under the auspices of the European External Action Service (EEAS). However, the aim is not to develop another policy document but to gain a consensus about the parameters of a common worldview, i.e. the nucleus of an epistemic community. That worldview would serve as the conceptual foundation for a European-wide educational institution to train and educate CSDP strategists.

This is not a new idea. The European Security and Defense College was established in 2005 to develop a shared security culture among a variety of professionals – including military officers – at the European level. An important political, symbolic and declaratory contribution to the Europeanization of military educational was made in recommendation 724 of the Western European Union (WEU), entitled “Developing a security and defense culture in the ESDP”. Conceptually the recommendation urged member states to increase integration among school and academy curricula with other parts of the training to be conducted internationally. In 2002 Greece suggested the establishment of common training capabilities for the armed forces participating in the ESDP. Recommendation 724 welcomed the bilateral Franco-German Security and Defense Council decision to establish a European Security and
Defense College (ESDC). According to the WEU document the establishment of the ESDC would contribute to the “opening [of the ESDP] toward civilian institutions” as well as “implementation of a common culture of security and defense”.

The WEU Assembly expressed its support for the ESDC with Recommendation 741 which called on all member states to:

[...] engage in an active policy of exchanges between European military schools, and establish a European Defense College with a multinational joint services intake with the aim of promoting higher training for officers and developing a common approach to a civil and military response to operations conducted in the ESDP framework. (Paile, 2010: 17).

The ESDC was incorporated within the EU during the Thessaloniki European Security and Defense Council (June 19-20, 2003) and was implemented by Common Action 2005/575/CFSP of the Council, July 18, 2005, “establishing a European Security and Defense College (ESDC)” (ibid.: 18). The first objective of the ESDC, which as Paile observed was of great symbolic significance, was to “further enhance European security culture within the ESDP”. Council Joint Action 2008/550/CFSP of June 2008, “Establishing a European Security and Defense College (ESDC)” and repealing Joint Action of 2005, assigned the ESDC two new tasks, including “support exchange [for] programmes in the field of ESDP between the Member States’ training institutes”. It legally empowered the ESDC to engage in education. The ESDC conducts a course for roughly 60 participants selected by the MS – a maximum of two per state – and by candidate- or neighborhood policy countries to acquire familiarity with the mechanisms and values of the CSDP (ibid.).

In essence, the ESDC was intended to construct a European strategic culture promoting the CSDP worldview, creating required expertise at the European level to support the continuing development of CSDP strategies, training and educating personnel in CSDP concepts and procedures and networking with relevant civilian and military centers. However, despite some significant contributions, the college never met its assigned long-term aims. This may be attributable to the fact that like other CSDP projects, it is a voluntary initiative that is supported by those member states which find it of interest but it lacks the prestige or authority to make it a center of expertise.
and training that must be consulted regarding European security and defense issues.

However, the model suggested here, and the success of the Baltic Defense College suggests that there is more to the story. What the ESDC (and the CSDP in general) lacks is the backing of a group of experts and officials among several of the member states that could reach an agreement to use the ‘crisis management core’ not as a common ground for another European Security Strategy (ESS) but as the heart of a CSDP epistemic community. It was the relentless work of such a community that earned the Baltic Defense College its recognition as a crucial thinking and education center for the Baltic states, one that coordinated the adoption of Total Defense and then NATO doctrines as its curriculum to promote tri-national objectives; and one that ensured the assignment of the best and brightest among military and civilian officials to the college and post-graduation to positions of authority. This last measure ensured the expansion of the college program’s influence and the institutionalizing of the strategic culture constructed by the then hegemonic epistemic community.

Only through the creation of such a CSDP epistemic community, and the dedication and hard work of its members, can the ESDC become a formal, prestigious institution. Such an institution would be a European Defense University, with a strong CSDP curriculum, research capabilities, outreach programs and important post-graduation assignments for Europe’s best and brightest CSDP-related personnel. It is argued here, based on the model presented above, that only a university of this type could provide the EU with the required corps of strategists to promote and institutionalize European strategic culture. Without actively embedding a strategic culture that works through its worldview, expertise, values and attitudes to develop real life solutions for the EU’s foreign and defense policy, the ESS and CSDP cannot realize their potential.

Conclusions

This article is a theoretical and policy-oriented contribution to the current debate about the historical significance of the ESS, the current status of the CSDP and potential future directions for the EU’s foreign and security policies. In contrast to most of the scholarship on European Security it argues that the problem lies not in institutional, policymaking or political problems but in an improper understanding of the role of strategic culture in supporting the
implementation of EU’s foreign policy goals. It presents a new model to evaluate strategic culture with a positivist research design to demonstrate its validity and potential to provide policy oriented analysis. Through the case study of the Baltic Defense College we were able to demonstrate its usefulness in understanding the social mechanisms used to construct and adopt a new strategic culture. Therefore the article contributes to the emerging scholarship offering a dynamic understanding of strategic culture through the role of agency in options selection. Finally, the article concluded with a policy oriented proposal of how to use the insights gained to develop a European strategic culture through the establishment of an epistemic community supporting a European Defense University.

References


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