Lines in the Sand: The Strategic Culture in the Afghan Taliban

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s, the analytic construct of strategic culture rarely been addressed by international relations theorists. This article attempts to revive the concept of strategic culture by using it to draw falsifiable conclusions about the strategic behavior of a violent non-state actor. I adapt Alastair Johnston's methodology designed for the analyzing the strategic culture of nation-states and use it to analyze violent non-state actors, simplifying it and modifying it where appropriate and necessary. After scoring three texts authored by Taliban leadership figures for the presence of key cultural assumptions, I suggest that the Taliban's strategic culture inclines them heavily toward continued armed insurrection. I comment on the implications of this finding for the ultimate resolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)/Taliban conflict in Afghanistan, predicting that the Taliban's strategic culture makes negotiated settlement (such as a power sharing agreement) unlikely. Finally, I explore ways in which the revised methodology might be further developed and improved.

Introduction

 I am considering two promises. One is the promise of Allah, the other of Bush. The promise of Allah is that my land is vast... the promise of Bush is that there is no place on Earth where I can hide that he won't find me. We shall see which promise is fulfilled.

> - Taliban Leader Mullah Omar, quoted in a 2001 interview with Voice of America

Culture influences how people in a country, including military strategists and policymakers, think about war and peace. Articles and arguments about strategy and strategic culture have focused on the strategic cultures of nation-states, their citizens, and their armies. The strategic culture of the United States has received attention from scholars, as have Australia, Great Britain, and Israel (Mahnken 3). Strategic studies scholars have also analyzed the strategic

cultures of states that stand as rivals to Western powers, including the USSR (Snyder), its successor state, the Russian Federation (Ermath), and China (Scobell).

However, since the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the United States mainland, the forces that have most often engaged the armed forces of the United States in combat have not been the armies of Russia or China or even nation states at all, but rather Islamist insurgencies. The longest running of these conflicts involves NATO's American-backed International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) intervention in Afghanistan against the Taliban, who ruled the country from 1996 to 2001. As of 2016, US combat operations in Afghanistan have officially ended, but roughly 10,000 US troops remain deployed in Afghanistan to support Afghan government forces as they battle against the Taliban (Rosenberg and Shear).

Of course, American security interests in the region may continue even if US troops depart from Afghanistan. The United States will likely continue to provide some level of financial and intelligence support to the Afghan government in Kabul with the goal of denying Al-Qaida and the Taliban safe havens to plan new attacks against American strategic interests and the American homeland. At the same time, it appears the American government has made efforts to negotiate with the Taliban, with the ultimate goal of ending the conflict (Hodge). The American and Afghan governments will want to understand the Taliban's strategic culture to understand what type of strategic moves the Taliban are likely to make and if the Taliban are indeed inclined to accept any type of peace agreement. Yet it appears that no comprehensive public analysis of the Taliban's strategic culture exists.

This paper seeks to apply the analytic concept of strategic culture to the Afghan Taliban group. First, I attempt to find a solution to past disputes about definitions and methodology in strategic culture studies. Relying on existing literature, I modify several of the concepts put forth by other scholars so that they may be used to analyze violent non-state actors.[1] I then examine three texts authored by various Taliban leaders for the key assumptions about violence in human life that make up strategic culture, leading to the conclusion that the Taliban's strategic culture inclines them to continue their armed insurrection in Afghanistan. Finally, I discuss the policy implications of this conclusion and the limitations of the analysis.

The History of Strategic Culture Theory

Strategic culture as an analytic concept first emerged in the late 1970s,

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1 Violent non-state actors are organizations that have political, economic, or military influence at a national or international level but do not belong to or align with any particular nation-state. Mercenary armies, criminal gangs, terrorist groups, and separatist fighters would all be considered violent non-state actors.

as international relations scholars sought to explain differences in the nuclear strategies developed by the United States and the Soviet Union (Stone). Theorists faced the problem that while the USSR and US existed in a relatively similar strategic environment, they seemed to have different strategic views about using nuclear weapons and the possibility of winning a nuclear war. This contradicted realist theory at the time, which suggested that nation-states make decisions based on a "forward looking calculation of expected utility" where utility is typically defined as power (Johnston, *Cultural* 35). Strategic culture solved this problem by suggesting that nation-states' power-calculations might be influenced by cultural factors – that because the USSR and United States had distinct cultures, they might make different decisions about the feasibility of war as a means to a political end. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.

Alastair Johnston (*Cultural*) traces the development of strategic culture literature across three distinct generations of theorists. The first generation, the origins of which are mentioned above, argued that differences in American and Soviet nuclear strategy originated from the different political culture, geography, and history of each country. According to Johnston, first-wave strategic culture theorists such as Jack Snyder and Colin Gray were highly deterministic, arguing that certain strategic cultures always tended to lead to certain predictable strategic behaviors. First wave theorists used broad definitions of strategic culture, and when making arguments about a nation's strategic culture, often cited as evidence a nation's history, geography, the organizational culture of its military, and its previous strategic choices.

The second wave of strategic culture theorists focused heavily on the idea of strategic culture as a tool of elite hegemony in strategic decision making. These theorists (Luckham; Klein) suggested that elites use strategic narratives to legitimize their own authority and their decisions to use violence against enemies. In contrast to first generation theorists, second-wave theorists delinked strategic culture from actual strategic behavior. Returning to the case of Soviet and American nuclear strategy, second generation theorists might suggest that while Soviet and American elites legitimize force in differing ways, it remains possible that their operational behavior could still be similar.

The third wave of strategic culture theorists emerged in the 1990s. According to Johnston, third-wave theorists, such as Jeffrey Legro, conceptualized culture in a wider variety of ways, with some authors treating recent cultural experiences or domestic political changes ("organizational culture") as more important than historical practices. Third-wave theorists were also more interested in testing strategic culture theories against other prominent international relations theories to strengthen conceptual methodology. Finally, in a departure from first wave theorists, third wave theorists excluded a nation's past strategic choices when considering strategic culture.

The appropriate definition of strategic culture and the appropriate

Traditional Realist Decision Making Model

| Strategic Situation of Nation | → Power based calculation → | Nation Makes Strategic Choice |

Decision Making Mediated By Culture

| Strategic Situation of Nation | → Cultural factors → | Culturally Mediated Strategic Options | → Power based calculation → | Nation Makes Strategic Choice |
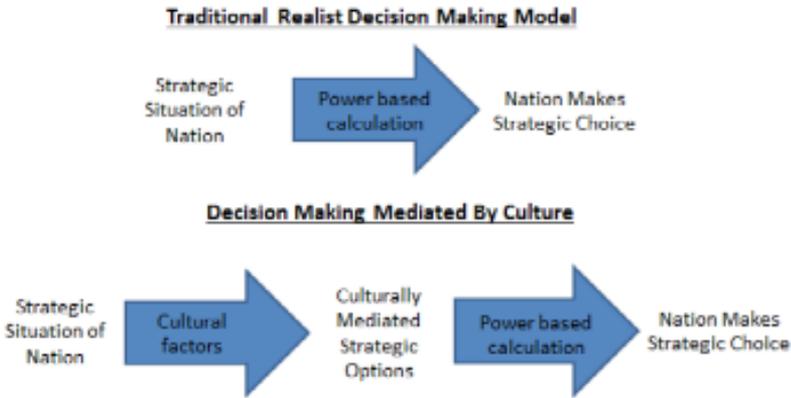
Figure 1: How Strategic Culture Modifies Realist Theory

methodology for determining a nation's strategic culture are still very much in dispute. Johnston (*Cultural*) argues that despite several decades of development, the analytic concept of strategic culture is still poorly defined. He suggests that strategic culture theorists are still overly deterministic as a result of a failure to explore the exact nature of the link between culture and behavior. He instead seeks to develop a definition of strategic culture that is both falsifiable and usable to determine an ordered set of grand strategic behavioral preferences. Johnston defines strategic culture as a:

> system of symbols (e.g., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors) which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role of efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these preferences with such an aura of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious. (*Cultural* 30)

Like other third-wave theorists, Johnston's definition excludes the possibility of using a nation state's past behavior as in indicator of its strategic culture. He argues that first-wave definitions of strategic culture had, by virtue of including past behavior as an independent variable, become essentially tautological: theorists were using a state's behavior to define its strategic culture, which explained its behavior. Johnston suggests instead that strategic culture should center on a nation's cultural assumptions about three key elements: the nature of the adversary, the frequency of conflict in human life, and the effectiveness of

violence as a political solution (*Cultural* 47).

      In his 1995 book *Cultural Realism*, Johnston approaches the methodological problem of strategic culture first by identifying a period in Chinese history (the Ming Dynasty) where Chinese organizational culture and the nature of the threat to the Chinese nation were relatively constant.[2] He then analyzes seven key military texts from this time period, using concept mapping and symbolic analysis to identify which type of grand strategies[3] each author preferred. He tests for the presence of consistency across the texts and finally ties these conclusions back to his three part definition of strategic culture. Johnston eventually identifies the presence of two strategic cultures and then makes an argument that the dominant one is offensively oriented.

      In response to Johnston's work and accompanying critiques of strategic culture theory, Colin Gray argues that, because human beings are ultimately cultural agents, a nation's past observed behavior must be included in definitions of strategic culture even if the implications are methodologically frustrating. Strategic culture, Gray writes, is "the world of mind, feeling and *habit in behavior*" ("Strategic," 58, emphasis in original). Gray's original article on the United States' strategic culture takes a much less positivistic approach than Johnston. Methodologically, Gray and those who identify with his approach make historical arguments – seeking to identify a cultural "metanarrative" (as opposed to a list of general strategic preferences) that influences strategic decision making, rather than simply examining discrete cultural artifacts for the presence or absence of certain cultural assumptions.

      This methodological divide has serious consequences for any strategic culture analysis. Johnston's appeal to rigorous, positivistic methodology is no doubt compelling from a methodological standpoint. A rigorous methodology reduces the risk that cultural analysis will slide into reifying cultural tropes and has the added benefit of providing a framework other scholars may replicate. On the other hand, it is also important to recognize what Gray criticizes as the "methodological bog" that scholars fall into during the quest for certainty. Overly sophisticated triumphs of social science theory do not always result in useful practical knowledge (Gray, *Wilderness* 4). This is of particular concern in the present case, where the amount of source material available for analysis is limited.

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2 Johnston is deeply concerned with isolating the behavioral impact of strategic culture from the behavioral decisions caused by changes in other variables. As such, he limits his analysis to a time period where the external threat to the Chinese state was singular (the Mongols) and the internal Chinese political culture was mostly unchanging (the Ming Dynasty).

3 Johnston considered these strategies to be very broad. A nation-state, in Johnston's view, might be culturally predisposed to prefer generally offensive military strategies, generally defensive strategies, or generally accommodationist strategies.

HIGH

FREQUENCY
OF CONFLICT
IN HUMAN
AFFAIRS

EFFICACY OF
VIOLENCE

HIGH

A

B

LOW   HIGH

ZERO-SUM NATURE OF CONFLICT

A= HARD REALPOLITIK
B= SOFT IDEALPOLITIK
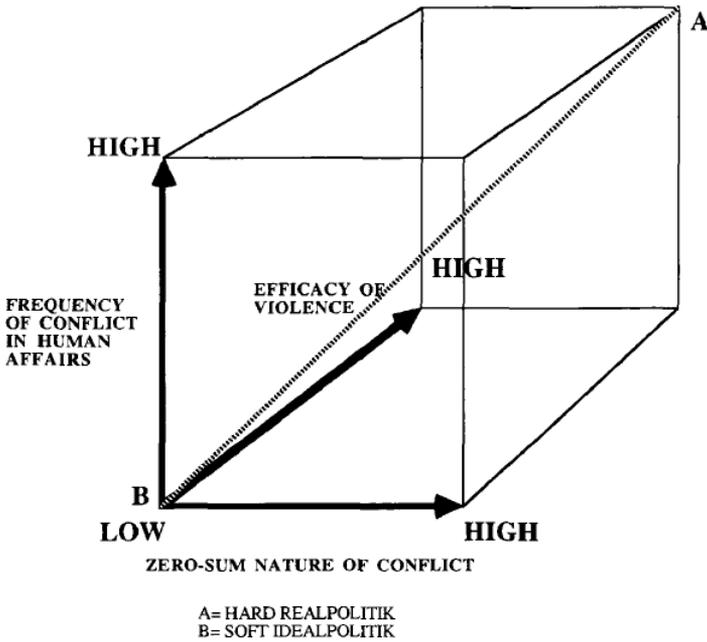
Figure 2: Johnston's Strategic Culture Paradigm

A Simplified Methodology

This analysis will use Johnston's definition of a strategic culture to seek a compromise between the two dominant approaches to strategic culture. At the same time, his methodology will be simplified somewhat so as not to run the risk of overwhelming the subject matter. In general, this analysis approaches the Taliban case much as Johnston did the Chinese case: It begins by identifying a time period where the Taliban faced a consistent external threat and had a similar organizational culture. Then, certain cultural artifacts from that time period are analyzed and scored for the presence of key cultural assumptions about war. From these, a set of ordered strategic preferences based on the presence or absence of the three key strategic assumptions is developed.

Figure 2 is a visualization of the assumptions that comprise Johnston's definition of strategic culture. Johnston argues strategic culture is composed of a set of basic assumptions about the nature of war in human life: the nature of the threat faced (must conflict with the enemy be zero-sum?), the frequency of war in human affairs (is it rare or frequent?), and the efficacy of using (is force going to achieve what we want?). These beliefs frame a set of operational assumptions,

from which a decision about what kind of strategy is most effective for dealing with the threat should logically flow. At one end ("A") of the spectrum in Figure 2, states can be expected to adopt a hard realpolitik view of international affairs; at the other end ("B") they are more likely to adopt a soft idealpolitik perspective (Johnston, *Cultural* 47).

Applying this definition to our case, I will proceed by scoring three texts produced by the Taliban on each of the three central assumptions that form the basis of Johnston's strategic culture paradigm. A text where the assumption is not present will be scored a zero; where it is minimally present, a one; frequently present, a two; and always present, a three. The results will then be tested for consistency across each of the texts to see if a unified Taliban strategic culture can be said to exist. If it does, an argument can be made about what kind of grand strategies the Taliban are likely to prefer.

The texts selected are: a Taliban document seized by ISAF forces in Afghanistan called "The Rules of Jihad"; a collection of statements purportedly written by Taliban leader Mullah Omar and issued via the Taliban's online propaganda site; and a set of Taliban night letters to Afghans collected and analyzed by Thomas Johnson in 2007.[4] These texts were selected because Johnston's methodology suggests that scholars ought to analyze cultural artifacts that all come from a period where a nation had a similar organizational culture and when that nation was facing a consistent strategic threat. All of these documents come from the period between 2006 and 2014, when the Taliban operated as an unconventional force and faced a consistent security threat (NATO/Afghan government troops). This should help to isolate strategic culture from variables such as the Taliban's internal organizational culture and the strategic threat environment.

This analysis is limited by what is available; unlike some governments and militaries, the Taliban are not prolific writers. Additionally, the length of these documents varies; in total they are only about thirty pages of material. I will attempt to address the strengths and weaknesses of each set of documents as they are discussed. But taken together, these documents constitute a cross-section of Taliban statements and include statements to Afghans, statements to the West, and statements to their own fighters.

My hope is that a simplified methodology will be useful, broadly applicable, and replicable. Other scholars should be able to apply it to a wide variety of insurgent groups so long as a group has a unified national identity. Ideally, a writer with greater access to Taliban documents (such as a native speaker of Pashto or someone with access to classified materials) could use this methodol-

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4 I considered including chapters from *My Life with the Taliban* by Abdul Salam Zaeef among these texts. In the end, it was excluded it due to concerns about Zaeef's reliability and because he left the Taliban leadership cohort very shortly after the Taliban came into conflict with the United States/NATO.

ogy to analyze a wider set of documents and potentially even arrive at conclusions about the Taliban which differ from mine.

However, before diving into scoring these documents, two more methodological questions demand attention. First, does the literature support the idea of applying Johnston's conception of strategic culture to violent non-state actors like the Taliban? Second, before understanding the strategic preferences of non-state actors, it is necessary to address the question of what types of general strategic choices are actually available to them. Do the strategic options available to non-state actors differ from the options available to nation-states, and if so, how?

Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors

Despite methodological disagreements over the appropriate definition of strategic culture, one common facet of most definitions (including Johnston's) is that they purport to analyze the strategic decisions of nation states. Elizabeth Stone, reviewing the existing strategic culture literature for the Comparative Strategic Cultures (CSC) project in 2006, found only one cultural study of a non-state actor and noted the need for an expansion of the analytic concept. "If strategic culture as a discipline and lens is to survive," Stone writes, "it must move beyond its state centric approach to explaining policy and behavior" (2).

Since the publication of the CSC project, several strategic culture theorists have sought to extend the analytic concept to include violent non-state actors. Extending the definition of strategic culture to include non-state actors, like the Taliban, presents two methodological problems, some of which have been addressed by the existing literature and some of which have not. The first methodological problem is that when discussing non-state actors, ideas about the security of the "state" mean little. Although the Taliban were arguably the armed forces of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at one time, today's Taliban are not the military forces of a sovereign nation state.

Fortunately, existing literature makes the case that strategic culture can also be used to analyze national, ethnic, or identity groups. Several authors explicitly apply the construct of strategic culture to non-state actors. Long, Smith, T. H. Johnson, and Godson and Shultz have all redefined strategic culture to include non-state actors. Jerry Long in particular makes a strong case for the theoretical expansion of the concept while writing about the strategic culture of al-Qaida. Long argues that the nation, rather than the state, is the appropriate unit of analysis for strategic culture theorists, saying:

> [I]n many ways the nation is the unit more susceptible of strategic culture analysis, an analysis appropriate to the state only to that degree the state comprises those who share a national narrative. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Tamil Tigers, the Basque separatists, the Chechen rebels, and Hamas would be amenable to this analysis, for while they are

violent non-state actors, they are yet national actors within a
state setting. (6)

Long suggests that while nations and states often overlap, the nation is where
the culture that theorists seek to analyze originates and resides. He uses Iraq as
an example, noting that the internally divided country likely has three separate
and distinct strategic cultures: Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia.[5] This body of previous
work makes a strong case that violent non-state actors may be included in John-
ston's definition of strategic culture, even if his methodology has never been
precisely applied to them.

But even if we may apply the concept of strategic culture to the Tal-
iban, we must ask if they can be truly defined as a national group in the sense
Long means. The antigovernment movement in Afghanistan is not led by one
organized, hierarchical Taliban command structure. After the US invasion of
Afghanistan toppled the Taliban's government, the Afghan insurgency emerged
as a network of several jihadist groups that operated throughout Afghanistan in
opposition to the ISAF and Afghan government. Those groups include elements
of al-Qaida, the ISI-backed Haqqani Network, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
(IMU), Hezb-e-Islami, Lashkar-e-Taiiba, and to a lesser degree the Tehrik-e-Tal-
iban (who operate primarily in Pakistan). All of these groups are ethnically,
tribally, or organizationally distinct from the Afghan Taliban.

Complicating matters further, the Afghan Taliban has fractured over the
last two years. A 2013 study of Taliban insurgents and Afghan residents in Tal-
iban-dominated provinces suggested that the once-dominant Quetta Shura[6] lead-
ership council has split into three separate factions and that a separate leadership
Shura has gained influence in the Peshawar region of Pakistan (Giustozzi).
Nevertheless, the known leaders of each faction have a great deal in common
(Roggio). Taliban leaders are overwhelmingly former members of the Taliban
regime, veterans of the anti-Soviet Jihad, Pashtuns from southern Afghan prov-
inces, and educated in the Pakistani religious madrassa system (Gopal). What's
more, Afghan Taliban leaders continue to identify as part of the same national
group – the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Because the various leaders of the
Afghan Taliban share most elements of a common culture, an analysis of the
Taliban's strategic culture remains possible, even in the absence of a clearly
unified leadership hierarchy.

Non-State Actors' Grand Strategic Options

If a description of a nation or national group's strategic culture cannot

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5 Long compromises methodologically in his own article by using Johnston's definition of strategic
culture but framing his cultural analysis as a historical metanarrative reminiscent of Gray's work. I
follow his methodology of compromise in my own study.
6 "Shura" is an Arabic word typically used to describe a political leadership council in Muslim-ma-
jority countries.

be used to predict in some way the behavior of the nation or group in question, its usefulness is limited. In order for my adaptation of Johnston's methodology to provide us with a ranked set of strategic preferences for non-state actors, I must first determine what those non-state actors' grand strategic options might be. When it comes to nation-states, Johnston argues that identifying a nation's strategic culture should also allow a researcher to identify a set of "ranked strategic preferences" and suggests a typology of three possible grand strategies[7] nation-states could pursue: offensive, defensive, and accommodationist (*Cultural* 112).

With some minor modifications, it is not difficult to see how violent non-state actors might employ offensive and accommodationist strategies. An insurgency that is focused on total destruction of its enemies is arguably global in scope, with the Islamic State or al-Qaida being potential examples. An accommodationist non-state actor might be more inclined to enter into a peace agreement that achieves some of its political goals, as the Palestinian Liberation Organization eventually did. But a "defensive" grand strategy is far more problematic. What is a violent non-state actor "defending"? Are they fighting to separate from their local government? Are they battling for autonomy or independence? Or are they fighting for rule over an entire geographic area? A non-state actor may seek to expand the territory it controls without necessarily requiring the destruction of all opposing forces; many civil wars have ended when a region is granted autonomy. Saying that a violent non-state group has adopted a "defensive" strategy tells us little about what their actual behavior will be.

I argue for splitting the category of defense into two: one for an actor focused solely on keeping control of territory they already hold (separatist) and one that is dedicated to defeating all enemies within a specific geographic area (insurrectionist). Thus, we are left with four possible types of grand strategy for non-state actors:

1. Offensive: A highly coercive strategy that relies heavily on transnational preemptive and punitive attacks on enemy states and groups. The strategy implies a belief in the possibility of complete military victory, the total political destruction of enemies, and possibly territorial expansion.

2. Insurrectionist: A geographically localized version of an offensive strategy. Insurrectionist insurgencies exclude the possibility of political compromise and are focused on destroying local political enemies and seizing control of nearby territory. But non-state actors employing insurrectionist strategies have little interest in launching attacks outside a limited geographical area.

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7 Johnston uses the term "grand strategies" to describe a nation-state's general strategic outlook when making decisions about whether or not to use military force to achieve a political goal.

3. Separatist: A more geographically defensive strategy. Separatism-oriented insurgencies will focus on using force to achieve security only for the territory, resources, and people in areas they already control. They will agree only to political arrangements that give them some degree of autonomy and meaningful territorial security.

4. Accommodationist: A strategy focused on achieving security through political settlements, alliance building with other groups, or political/territorial concessions. Accommodationist strategies implicitly recognize that physical and political elimination of the adversary using force is not possible or even desirable.

These typologies provide a scale on which non-state actors' strategies may be placed in accordance with where they fall in each of the previously mentioned dimensions of strategic culture.

If an analysis reveals that a group views war as a frequent part of life, conflict as zero-sum, and violence as an effective means of achieving political goals, it flows logically that they will adopt a more offensive grand strategy. Conversely, a group that views violence as ineffective, war as rare, and conflict as non-zero sum should adopt a more accommodationist grand strategy. A group or state that falls somewhere in the middle should adopt a grand strategy where violence plays an important but limited role. This connection is visualized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: How Strategic Culture Translates Into Strategic Choice

It is important here to distinguish political goals from grand strategic choices. Groups and states may have the same political goal but use different grand strategies to achieve their outcomes. An interesting example might be the present Palestinian statehood movement: The Palestinian Authority has sought to achieve an independent Palestinian state primarily via cooperation and negotiation with Israeli occupiers. On the other hand, groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad have primarily used violent strategies in an attempt to achieve the same overall political goal.

With this typology of grand strategies established, we may finally move

onto the true question: What do the Taliban's writings, as cultural artifacts, tell us about their views on the frequency of violence in human life, the efficacy of armed conflict, and the nature of the enemy? And what do those views tell us about the Taliban's strategic preferences?

Taliban Texts and Strategic Culture

We may now move directly into an analysis of the three different texts authored by Taliban leadership figures in order to score each in the three categories that make up Johnston's strategic culture paradigm. Using direct quotations from the text as examples, I will assign a score to each representing the authors' assumptions about the frequency of violence in human life, the effectiveness of armed conflict as a means of achieving goals, and the nature of the enemy. Other than the general criteria outlined previously, these scores are subjective; ideally source documents would be scored by a variety of readers whose scores could then be averaged for each document. After checking to see if the scores assigned to all three texts are relatively consistent, we should be able to determine if a unified Taliban strategic culture is present. From there we may draw conclusions about what kind of grand strategies the Taliban's strategic culture suggests they are inclined to take.

The Rules of Jihad

The "Rules of Jihad Established for Mujahideen by the Leadership of the Afghanistan Islamic Emirates" (which I hereafter simply refer to as the "Rules of Jihad") were captured by NATO forces operating in Afghanistan in 2007. Originally written in Pashto, the West Point's Combating Terrorism Center translated the document and made it publicly available online. The five page document establishes twenty-nine rules that Taliban fighters are expected to follow while conducting combat operations in Afghanistan. The rules deal with a variety of topics including drug use, how to handle Afghans who are working with NATO and government forces, and how to deal with issues within the Taliban chain of command. The authors are unknown, but we can assume they are probably high or mid-level Taliban commanders.

As far as I have been able to determine, the "Rules of Jihad" come closest to a Taliban "field manual" ever acquired by NATO forces (although it is possible other Taliban documents have not been made available to the general public). It is the only document I analyzed that is a direct internal military communication between Taliban leaders and fighters. Because the Taliban presumably never intended for this document to be made public, it is also probably less likely to reflect what the Taliban want Western audiences to hear, as opposed to some of the more propaganda-oriented documents I reviewed.

With respect to the frequency of violence in human life, the "Rules of Jihad" arguably presume to some degree that armed conflict will occur, because

they are a set of military guidelines. This fact is not dispositive, however. Parts of the document give us a broader idea of how the authors view the frequency of conflict in human life. The document opens and closes with several statements about jihad which implicitly and explicitly argue that jihad is a central facet of Islamic (and therefore Afghan) life.[8] The opening of the document reads "Jihad in the name of God is such a high level of prayer and a holy mission for Muslims that makes the Apostles and the Islamic believers proud to be part of it" (2).

The body of the document is devoid of references to the role of jihad for Muslims, instead focusing on the various rules laid down for properly carrying it out. But at the end of the document the authors once again return to the role of jihad in an attempt to stress the importance of the rules they have laid out, and explicitly state that proper jihad is a religious duty. They write, "This Guidance is a powerful instruction for all Afghanistan's Islamic Emirate Mujahideen that are ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of God and for the cause of the Holy Jihad. This is their religious and Jihadi duty" (2).

Because the "Rules of Jihad" explicitly states that holy war is a central part of life for both Muslims and members of the Taliban, this document is scored as a three out of three in the category of frequency of violence in human life. The language employed strongly suggests that the authors of this document saw holy war as a central part of the religious lives of good Muslims.

Next, we must examine what the "Rules of Jihad" say about the nature of the enemy that the Taliban face. Do the authors view compromise with enemies as possible, or is the political dispute in Afghanistan seen as a zero-sum conflict where any victory for the government and NATO forces is a loss for the Taliban? Here the evidence from the document is more plentiful and a bit more mixed. The Rules of Jihad seem to preclude completely the possibility of the Taliban ever striking some kind of agreement with the Afghan government or NATO forces (typically referred to as Infidels). And yet, the same rules generally insist that government supporters who cease supporting the central government should be treated with respect and not harmed.

Some of the rules outlined by the document take a very hard line about what should happen to native Afghans who choose to work with the central government. As rule 25 states:

> We are informing all those teachers and mullahs [who] are working for the current empty-name government that they should immediately stop their cooperation, and if they don't then they should be punished by beatings. (3)

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8 It should be added that the word jihad, which originates from Arabic, is contested. Moderate and liberal Muslims often use the term to describe an internal struggle (the greater jihad). However, its use in the context of a military manual clearly refers to its alternate meaning – a justified religious war.

The rule goes on to state that those who teach "against Islam" (a crime left undefined) shall be punished by death. Another rule instructs fighters that nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations working in Afghanistan should be considered "opposition" as well (2). Members of NATO forces in Afghanistan are repeatedly referred to as "infidels". It is clear from statements like these that the Taliban have no interest in letting the central government and NATO forces have any significant political control over any part of Afghanistan.

Yet despite the hostility directed towards NATO forces and those perceived to be working with them, the Taliban's viewpoint does not seem to cross into advocating for the total elimination of anyone affiliated with the central government. Rule 5 in in the document commands that those who break their ties with the Afghan government should not be harmed:

> If a person breaks up his ties with the Infidels, and the Mujahideen give him guarantees for full protection, and this person is killed by a Mujahid or harmed in some way, then the person who committed the crime in not backed up by the Islamic Movement, and he would be dealt according to the laws of Shariha. (2)

At least three other rules also refer to the possibility of compromising with or winning over government sympathizers. This suggests that while the authors of the document are not especially willing to tolerate the idea of sharing political control with the government, they do not necessarily view all those who support the central government as their enemy. It is worth noting, however, that the same cannot be said for members of NATO forces; the writers clearly see conflict with NATO troops and foreigners as zero-sum. Because the authors of the "Rules of Jihad" often, but not always, assume conflict is zero-sum, the document scores two out of three possible points in this category.

Many of the same factors are considered when scoring this document for the authors' views on the effectiveness of violence in achieving goals. Although the document itself is clearly intended as guidance for Taliban fighters, at least ten of the twenty-nine rules contained therein actually deal not with military discipline but with how fighters should go about undermining the Afghan government via non-violent means. The first five rules provide the most direct guidance on this point – in fact the very first rule states, "An Authority [from the Taliban side] can invite those Afghans [who] are supporting and working for the Infidels to join the true path of Islam"(1). We can infer from this heavy emphasis on winning over NATO-aligned Afghans that the Taliban actually consider non-military methods to be at least as effective as violence in dealing with NATO-aligned forces.

On the other hand, any discussion of dealing with NATO and foreign

forces in a non-violent manner is completely absent. NATO forces are constant-
ly referred to as "infidels"; the term is used at least ten times in the five page
document.[9] While we can infer from this that while the authors may consider
violence a more effective tool for dealing with NATO troops than with NA-
TO-aligned Afghans, the overwhelming emphasis in the document is on winning
over Afghan support via non-violent means. Thus, this document is scored as a
one out of three for the assumption that violence is effective.

Mullah Omar's Statements

      Mullah Mohammed Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban, headed
the movement since its inception in 1992. He fled into hiding after the US-led
invasion, most likely into Pakistan. In July of 2015, the Afghan Taliban admitted
Omar had died of natural causes sometime in 2013 (Popalzai, Smith, and Mc-
Laughlin). Omar rarely gave statements to the media before or during the NATO
invasion that toppled his government, but over the years a number of statements
have been issued using his name on the Muslim holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid
al-Adha.[10] I analyzed six of these statements for each of the three assumptions
that make up strategic culture: one statement from 2011, one from 2012, two
from 2013, and two from 2014.

      Although it seems unlikely that the late Omar actually authored all of
these statements, several factors suggest they were nonetheless likely approved
for release by him while he was still alive or created by others in the Taliban
(either before or after his death) and authorized by the current Taliban leader-
ship. The website on which they are posted, named Shahamat, hosts translations
of all content in Urdu, Farsi, English, Arabic, and Pashto. The domain itself is
registered to someone who claims to live in Kandahar, an Afghan city where the
Taliban insurgency has been strongest.[11] Several dozen other statements on the
website are attributed to an individual who has presented himself as a Taliban
media spokesperson in phone calls to journalists (Walsh and Muzhary). At least
two independent media reports also cite Shahamat as an official Taliban propa-
ganda site (Hairan; Gwakh).

      In the "Eid Statements", "Omar" rarely refers to how often violence
occurs in human life. The most common chronological reference is to use the
ongoing length of the war against NATO troops as evidence of the Taliban's
determination. The following is a fairly typical passage: "For ten years now, our
courageous Mujahideen have been engaging in Jihad against a cruel and incur-

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9 The term is never used to describe Afghans in the document save for one possible reference to the
Kabul government as the "Infidel Administration".
10 "Omar" also issued a statement regarding the prisoner exchange between the United States and
the Taliban of Bowe Bergdahl, but I excluded it from this analysis primarily because of its brevity.
11 An unexplained mystery is why the US government continues to allow this website to remain
online, considering that US intelligence and law enforcement agencies almost certainly have the
capability to disable it.

sive enemy for a noble cause and are presenting countless sacrifices in this path everyday"(Omar, "Eid-ul-Odha", 2011). The statements also frequently refer to the struggles of Muslims in other countries. References to Muslim lives lost in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine are common, with references to the wider Islamist struggle appearing in five out of the six documents. I infer from this that the authors of the statements believe modern Muslim life is heavily defined by armed conflict.

Surprisingly, despite the inclusion of many Quranic verses in the statements, explicit passages referring to the importance of jihad in Muslim life appear only in one out of the six statements. Additionally, references to the long Afghan fight against the Soviet Union and other invaders are lacking. Although we might expect that these types of references would be common given the relative length of these statements, a reference to the Soviet Afghan war only appears once. Because the authors of the writings only sometimes assume that violence in human life is frequent, the statements score a two out of three in this category.

The "Eid Statements'" assumptions about the effectiveness of violence in these statements also come across as mixed. On one hand, statements about the grand military victories, great sacrifices of Taliban fighters, and the inevitable defeat of the invading NATO forces are a key part of every statement. The following passage from the 2014 "Eid-ul-Odha" statement is typical:

> The Americans are entangled in Afghanistan in a long war
> of their history. The astronomical military and financial
> losses and the dwindling of America's status credibility
> at (sic) world's level are signs indicating her decline. The
> jittery-haunted rulers of the White House are trying, in a state
> of despondency, to win this disadvantageous war. However,
> they have lost all possibilities to win it. (Omar, "Eid-ul-Odha",
> 2014)

And yet, these kinds of grand and general statements (clearly intended for propaganda purposes) are almost always accompanied shortly thereafter by a transition into a discussion of the Taliban's political and diplomatic successes. Consider the following passage from the same statement:

> The Islamic Emirate is trying to reach its lofty goal through
> military activities and through inception of positive relations
> with world's credible sides. It has conveyed its message to the
> public of the world via its media outfit and the political office.
> It is to be mentioned that maintenance of contact and relations
> with all foreign and domestic sides falls under the sphere of
> the political office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.
> (Omar, "Eid-ul-Odha", 2014)

Similar discussions about the successes of the Taliban's "Political Office" are frequent; it appears twelve times and is referenced in five out of the six statements. The writings suggest that the authors see violence as a highly effective means to achieving policy goals but also clearly see a need for political legitimacy that can only be achieved through some form of negotiation. Because of this, these documents receive a score of two out of three for assumptions about the efficacy of violence.

When it comes to whether or not conflict is zero-sum, the authors of the "Eid Statements" seem to draw the same type of distinction between Afghan supporters of NATO and NATO troops that we see in the "Rules of Jihad". The "Eid Statements" are uncompromising in their indictment of foreign troops. They deride them as "cruel and incursive" invaders who have come to Afghanistan "for the purpose of killing and torment." For example, "Omar" tells the Afghan people, "You have seen in the past 13 years, the astronomical dimension of the atrocities that the invaders and their domestic supporters have unleashed against the people" (Omar, "Eid-ul-Odha", 2014). This type of rhetoric is typical whenever the authors describe NATO troops in Afghanistan.

Nowhere in any of the documents do the authors suggest that they contemplate any possibility of compromise with foreign invaders. But again, this passage is also making a key distinction: the NATO "invaders" are not seen as the same as "domestic supporters." In fact, at times "Omar" goes out of his way to invite supporters of the Kabul government to change sides, writing: "We once again invite the internal opposition to renounce their cooperation of the invaders for the sake of their religion . . . . Your life, wealth, and honor will be protected" (Omar, "Eid-ul-Odha", 2011). By differentiating the internal opposition from NATO troops, the authors leave open some possibility of political reconciliation.

Because the authors of the "Eid Statements" often assume conflict with NATO troops is zero-sum, but take a softer view of Afghan supporters of the NATO-backed government, these documents receive a rating of two out of three for the assumption that conflict is zero-sum.

Night Letters

I am indebted to Thomas H. Johnson for collecting and analyzing six different examples of *Shabnamah*, or "Night Letters". "Night Letters" are written messages often distributed in or delivered to the leaders of rural Afghan villages. Their use as tools of social mobilization long predates the Taliban and the American invasion of Afghanistan, and they are extremely important sources of narratives to Afghans living in the Afghan-Pakistani border region. Johnson also did his own analysis of the Taliban "Night Letters", exploring how the Taliban used historical and cultural narratives to undermine NATO and Afghan government efforts to provide services and build credibility in rural areas. While Johnson's work in compiling translations of these letters is invaluable, my analy-

sis is focused instead on these letters as cultural artifacts.

The half-dozen "Night Letters" available to me vary widely in tone and content, but the underlying assumptions Johnston identified in strategic culture are all present in them. They are especially valuable because unlike the other texts examined, these letters are the only texts we have that were originally directed for consumption exclusively by Afghan citizens, rather than Westerners or Taliban fighters.

The "Night Letters" are notably more violent than the other two texts. There is no mention of the Political Office or national unity, as was seen in the Eid Statements and Rules of Jihad. Instead, the letters overwhelmingly represent an attempt to intimidate Afghanis who would choose to work with coalition and government forces. Even the first letter in the series, which primarily makes a historical-religious appeal to Afghans, implies the possibility of violence at its conclusion (T. H. Johnson 332).

Several of the letters represent nothing except attempts at intimidation. Letter five, directed at a provincial director of education for the Afghan government, makes startlingly direct and personal threats of violence:

> I am telling you to leave your post and if you continue your
> work, I will do something that doesn't have a good ending. . .
> . I wanted to transform your life to death. . . . But if you don't
> resign your work, I will attack you and take you to death.
> (334)

The author continues that he has been stalking the director with the intent of killing her and her bodyguard. Because every one of the six letters collected by Johnson makes an implied or explicit threat of violence with no mention whatsoever of political compromise, the Taliban "Night Letters" score a three out of three for assumptions about the efficacy of violence.

The Taliban's "Night Letters" are less explicit about their beliefs regarding the frequency of violence in human life. Most letters are silent on whether or not violence is an essential part of human life; letters four, five, and six are entirely focused on the "here and now" of how Afghans should avoid cooperation with NATO/government forces.

However, the three letters that do touch on the topic are quite explicit that the Taliban believe that conflict and resistance are long-term facets of Afghan life. One letter calls specifically on Afghan military history as a means of urging Afghans to take up arms, saying:

> You have served Islam a great deal throughout history and
> have defeated the non-Muslims of the world. Your ancestors

such as Ahmad Shah Abdaali, Mahmood Ghaznawi, Sha-
haabuddin Ghori, and other heroes have recorded a great histo-
ry in fighting against non-Muslims. . . . (322)

Abdaali, Ghaznawi, and Ghori were historical tribal kings who ruled
in Afghanistan during 1700s, 1000s, and 1100s, respectively. All led tribal and
religious wars against various invaders and rival tribes (323) and are widely
respected among Afghans. The vast history referenced here shows the depth of
the Taliban's cultural assumptions about the role of conflict – they see them-
selves in the context of armed Islamic resistance movements that date back more
than 1000 years. One letter also references the Soviet invasion in passing as a
warning to collaborators:

We know the name and place of every person; learn a lesson
from those who were loyal to the Russians; (if God wills) soon
you will come under the knife or bullet of the Mujahedeen.
(327)

Because some of the Taliban "Night Letters" suggest that the Taliban view
armed religious warfare as common and lengthy, but the references are less
frequent than we might expect, I have scored the Taliban "Night Letters" as
receiving a two out of three for assumptions about the frequency of violence in
human life.

When it comes to assumptions about whether or not conflict is ze-
ro-sum, the Taliban "Night Letters" are fairly unequivocal. The typical con-
demnation of NATO troops makes them out to be little better than barbarians:
"During this time the cruel crusaders' army and their domestic servants have
committed grave atrocities, barbarity and savagery against our innocent brothers
and sisters"(322). This type of rhetorical attack on foreign troops seems to leave
little room for any sort of non-military solution to the war. While this rhetoric
about foreign troops is not especially surprising, what is noticeably absent from
the "Night Letters" are any of the "carrots" offered to Afghans to give up aiding
the NATO-backed government forces that we saw in other Taliban writings.
No promises are made to protect the lives and properties of those who defect,
as we saw in the "Rules of Jihad". Those who aid the Afghan government are
threatened with "serious consequences" (letter three) and "mortal and eternal"
responsibility for their own suffering (letter six). Because the tone of the "Night
Letters" overwhelmingly indicates an assumption that conflict is zero-sum, I
have scored the "Night Letters" as three out of three in that category.

Conclusion and Implications

Table 1 shows the overall scores for each of these sets of text across
each of the three basic assumptions that make up a strategic culture. As we can

see, the overall scores for each set of texts are remarkably consistent. The documents received five scores of two, three scores of three, one score of one, and no scores of zero. This consistency of assumptions across a variety of cultural artifacts suggests that a unified Taliban strategic culture does in fact exist.

Table 1: Overall Scores Across Each Strategic Culture Assumption			
Category	Taliban Rules of Jihad	Eid Statements	Taliban Night Letters
Freq. of Violence in Human Life	3	2	2
Zero Sum Nature of Conflict	2	2	3
Belief in Efficacy of Violence	1	2	3
Arithmetic Mean	2	2	2.66

The overall average score for all texts across all three categories is 2.22 after being rounded to the nearest hundredth. Logically, a more realpolitik strategic culture should translate into a more offensive type of overall grand strategy. Figure 4 locates the Taliban's average score on a spectrum relating strategic culture to grand strategy, assuming that the most realpolitik strategic culture should score perfect threes and the most idealpolitik strategic culture should score perfect zeros. With a score of 2.22, the Taliban certainly fall on the more realpolitik end of the spectrum, but they also have not received the hardest realpolitik scores we might expect from listening to the more breathless assertions about Islamic extremism. Indeed, this number suggests that the Taliban's top grand strategic preference should be insurrection aimed at toppling the Afghan government rather than an expansive global or regional offensive grand strategy.

We can conclude that the Taliban's first grand strategic choice will be to target local opponents and the Afghan government with a violent insurrection aimed at expanding Taliban power via coercion. But Johnston suggests that not only should strategic culture be able to predict a falsifiable strategic first choice,

Strategic Choice

Idealpolitik   Realpolitik

Accomodationist (0)   Separatist (1)   Insurrectionist (2)   Offensive (3)

Afghan Taliban, 2.22

Figure 4: Taliban Strategic Culture on the Spectrum

it should also produce a ranked set of strategic preferences. A simple strategic choice ranking may be derived from Figure 4 based on where the Afghan Taliban resides on the spectrum: the strategies they are nearest to on the spectrum should be their next choices. From this we can conclude that the Taliban would likely choose a broad offensive strategy should an insurrectionist strategy seem impossible, and then a separatist strategy should that fail, and finally an accommodationist strategy only once all other strategies have failed.

It is important to add that these strategic choices are not a precise, deterministic prediction of exactly what the Taliban will do. Strategic decisions are not solely the product of strategic culture; they are the product of the strategic situation a non-state actor faces as well. As I noted at the beginning of this paper, strategic culture predictions serve simply to modify the traditional realist model of how actors make decisions to account for culture. If the strategic situation changed drastically enough in Afghanistan, it is possible that the Taliban would be willing to strike some kind of agreement with the US and Afghan governments. What strategic culture tells us is that the Taliban would prefer other strategic options first. However, given no change in the "facts on the ground" in Afghanistan, this analysis should give us some idea of how the Taliban should behave.

Policy Implications

In its final report, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States recognized the importance of Afghanistan and other ungoverned spaces to those who plotted the September 11th attacks, writing:

Many details [in this report] illustrate the direct and indirect value of the Afghan sanctuary to al Qaeda in preparing the 9/11 attack and other operations. The organization cemented personal ties among veteran jihadists working together there for years. It had the operational space to gather and sift recruits, indoctrinating them in isolated, desert camps. (Ch. 12.2)

What happens in Afghanistan over the next ten years will be a product partly of what the Taliban decide to do, but also of how policymakers and the military decide to respond to them. If we assume the ultimate American strategic goal in Afghanistan is to avoid the establishment of a "safe haven" for future attacks on the United States, a few preliminary conclusions can be drawn about the implication of the Taliban's strategic culture for US policy.

First, while American and Afghan policymakers have repeatedly tried to engage with the Taliban politically over the last several years, the Taliban will almost certainly not accept a negotiated settlement with the United States. Any agreement signed by the US government and NATO would assume the continued existence of an American-friendly government in Kabul, and the pom continued presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. My ranking of the Taliban's grand strategic choices suggests that the Taliban are unlikely ever to accept this arrangement unless they were to find themselves at a severe strategic disadvantage. Instead, the Taliban will seek to continue their armed insurrection against NATO troops and the central government with the intent of removing both from Afghanistan and re-establishing the Islamic Emirate.

Second, even if the Taliban came to believe that their strategy of insurgency is ineffective, they are still unlikely to accept any kind of negotiated settlement. My analysis instead suggests that the Taliban would resort to more violent offensive strategies – perhaps attacks against American interests beyond central Asia – before considering the less offensive strategies of separatism and accommodation. Indeed, agreeing to a joint government with the NATO-backed Kabul administration would probably be the Taliban's least preferred strategic move. They may attempt to split away from Afghanistan before choosing this strategy, possibly by declaring heavily Pashtun southern Afghanistan an independent Islamic state. It is worth noting, however, that there is little indication that the Taliban have attempted to undertake any of these strategies, which suggests that the insurrectionist strategy is still dominant.

If American policymakers assume that the Taliban would again allow terrorists to potentially threaten US foreign interests should they retake power in Afghanistan, their strategic options are somewhat limited. The United States is left with two strategic options once negotiation is taken off the table. The US can either continue the war indefinitely in hopes of totally defeating the Taliban (something the Obama administration seems to have given up on) or fight a proxy war after withdrawing that keeps the Taliban permanently preoccupied with their local enemies. The Obama Administration seems first to have attempted the former option, only to see an American troop "surge" fail to significantly reduce Taliban operations in Afghanistan (Walsh and Muzhary). Now the US government seems to have shifted toward a version of the second option, seeking to limit the Afghan Taliban's ability to actually threaten the current Kabul government's existence even as it seeks negotiations with the Afghan Taliban

(Mazetti and Schmitt).

Theoretical Implications

These conclusions and recommendations are somewhat limited, and my methodology could be improved upon in a number of ways. Someone with access to a wider range of documents from the Taliban could apply this methodology on a broader scope. Optimally, the original documents would be analyzed by someone familiar with Pashto (preferably a native speaker), so that cultural nuance is not lost in translation. Finally, employing a group of individuals to score the documents could reduce the risk of bias, since I was the only person who scored these documents.

Ideally, the method used here would be applied by several native Pashto speakers scoring the widest possible variety of Pashto Taliban documents, which could then be averaged. Unfortunately, this kind of analysis is beyond the resources available to me at this time.

Given the limits of my study, one might ask why I make predictions and policy at all. The answer is that they are necessary if strategic culture methodology is ever to be improved. One of the benefits of the methodology developed and applied here is that my conclusions are falsifiable. If the strategic situation remains constant in Afghanistan over the next several years, and yet the Taliban agree to some kind of peace agreement that leaves the Afghan government in power, we will be able to state conclusively that either the methodology I developed or the way in which I applied it are faulty. If the Taliban abandon an insurrectionist strategy in favor of a separatist one without first resorting to transnational attacks, we will know that the method by which I have ranked strategic choices is faulty. As Alastair Johnston mentioned, the link between strategic culture and behavior has long needed – and still needs – more research. Only by making falsifiable and testable predictions will strategic culture scholars ever be able to firmly establish the nature of the connection between culture and behavior.

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