



# Understanding Strategic Culture: A Case Study of Pakistan



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## Introduction

The debate on strategic culture was initiated almost four decades ago and it encouraged the rethinking of the origin of strategies and strategic choices in international politics.<sup>1</sup> Strategic culture provides an analytical lens to comprehend the motivations of the state's action, which are often dominated by the state's historical tendency to "preserve its perceived spheres of influence".<sup>2</sup> In this issue brief, the author provides an overview of strategic culture and its evolution as a field of study in international relations and security studies. This is followed by the case study of Pakistan's strategic culture, which includes the potential sources of Pakistan's strategic culture, its strategic beliefs and how it operationalises these strategic beliefs. Lastly, the author elucidates the implications of Pakistan's strategic culture for India.

### Key Points

- Strategic culture is a bridge between material and ideational explanations of state behaviour, adding valuable perspectives to understand different country's contemporary security choices.
- The proponents of strategic culture argue that when a society experiences a severe shock or major disaster, it forces the prevailing culture to become more open-minded.
- The potential sources of Pakistan strategic culture are military organisations, elite beliefs, historical experiences and geography.
- Pakistan acts on certain strategic beliefs that are doggedly weaved by the Pakistan Army for their benefits at the cost of its nation. When operationalised on the ground in the form of tactics, these strategic beliefs have significant implications for India. The most important one is Pakistan sponsored terrorism.

## Synthesis of Strategy and Culture

In the 1970s, theorists of international relation and strategic thinkers proposed the idea that culture profoundly influences strategic decision-making.<sup>3</sup> Jack Synder, the earliest proponent of strategic culture, has introduced culture into modern security studies by developing a theory of strategic culture to interpret the nuclear doctrine of the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> He defined strategic culture as a "sum total of ideals, conditional emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of the national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to [...] strategy".<sup>5</sup> In recent years, there has been renewed academic and policy interest in exploring the role of culture in international security, because today, many scholars believe that culture –influences our perceptions (or beliefs) and the range of options states have for responding to these perceptions (or beliefs).<sup>6</sup>

### Definition of Culture

Definition of culture given by Talcott Parsons in *The Social System* (1951) and Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) became prominent sources of reference. These definitions are:

- *"Culture is comprised of 'interpretive codes' including language, values, and even substantive beliefs like the support of democracy or the futility of war".<sup>7</sup>*

—Talcott Parsons

- *"Culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about their attitudes towards life".<sup>8</sup>*

—Clifford Geertz

### Influence of Political Culture

When the behavioural movement or revolution in social sciences started in the western countries, social scientists started exploring the influence of culture in various fields. In 1963, two social scientists— Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba— in their work defined political culture as a "subset of beliefs and values of a society that relates to the political system".<sup>9</sup>

Almond and Verba gave three levels that manifests political culture:<sup>10</sup>

- **Cognitive.** empirical and causal beliefs;
- **Evaluative.** values, norms, and moral judgements;
- **Expressive.** emotional attachments, patterns of identity and loyalty, and feelings of affinity, aversion, or indifference.

The study of political culture influenced the thinkers of modern security studies because it yielded theoretical refinement in their attempt to study culture and its causal effect on the political behaviour of actors and society.

### **Approaches to Study Strategy and Culture**

In the 1960s, approaches started developing to study strategy and culture. So far, there are three main approaches to study strategy and culture:<sup>11</sup>

- The *first approach* sees culture as a value-added explanation of strategic behaviour. According to this approach, culture fills the gaps of explanation by supplementing theories centred on national interests and power distribution.
- The *second approach* assumes culture as a conceptual vehicle that can explain some, if not all, strategic behaviour.

The *third approach* believes that the relationship between strategy and culture is inordinately complex. The proponents of this approach argue that culture consists of discursive (what is said) and non-discursive (what is not said) expressions. Hence, they suggest that it is impossible to measure the influence of culture on strategy.

### **Definitions of Strategic Culture**

There are two dominant definitions of strategic culture. They are:

- *Strategic culture is the 'ideational milieu that limits behavioural choices', from which 'one could derive specific predictions about strategic choice'.*<sup>12</sup>

—Alastair Lain Johnston, *Thinking About Strategic Culture* (1995)

- *Strategic culture is a 'distinctive set of beliefs, values and habits regarding the threat and use of force, which have their roots in such fundamental influences as geopolitical setting, history and political culture'.<sup>13</sup>*

—Ken Booth and Russell Trood (1999)

To sum up, strategic culture could be defined as "a bridge between material and ideational explanations of state behaviour, adding valuable perspectives to understand different countries contemporary security choices".<sup>14</sup>

### ***What Can Change Strategic Culture?***

The proponents of strategic culture argue that, all cultures condition their members to think in a certain way while providing pre-set responses to a given situation. However, they have also added that "when a society experiences a severe shock or major disaster, it forces that culture to become more open-minded".<sup>15</sup> These shocks and disasters make states "momentarily susceptible to new explanations, new paradigms, new ways of thinking, all in search of understanding and mitigating the shock that has befallen them".<sup>16</sup> For example, prior to the defeat in World War II, Japan was a military power. Post1945, Japan fostered an 'anti-militaristic political-military culture' that was characterised by 'pacifism' and dependent on security alliance with the United States (US). The state of Japan developed the Yoshida doctrine that stressed Japan's economic and technological development while ensuring military security from the US.

### ***Potential Sources of Strategic Culture***

**Figure 1: Potential Sources of Strategic Culture**

Physical	Political	Social/Cultural
Geography	Historical Experience	Myths and Symbols
Climate	Political System	Defining Texts
Natural Resources	Elite Beliefs	
Generational Change	Military Organisations	
Technology		

← (Transnational Forces/ Normative Pressure) →

Source: John Baylis, James J Wirtz, and Colin S Gray (eds.), *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies*<sup>17</sup>

- **Physical.** Geography, climate and natural resources have been critical elements in strategic thinking throughout the millennia. Geographical circumstances are one of the key to understanding as to why some countries adopt particular strategic policies. For example, geographical circumstances appear to have strategic orientations of countries like Israel and Pakistan. Strategy is also influenced by access to vital resources. Recently, changing climate and its impact on the resource landscape are also critical to strategy. Some scholars argue that, generational change and technology, mainly information and communication technology, can significantly impact empowerment and strategic issues. For instance, while information technology has transformed societies, it has also allowed individuals or groups to communicate in innovative ways and cause disruption at a distance.
- **Political.** History and experience are essential factors in the evolution of strategic culture. According to some scholars, States confront different strategic problems with varying material and ideational resources, to which they apply unique responses.<sup>18</sup> Historical narratives also impact conceptions of state roles. Numerous states exhibit strong historical motivators, including the Arab World, Turkey, North Korea, Japan and Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> Other source of strategic culture comprises the country's political structure and military organisations.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the significant role of military organisation in Pakistan's strategic culture is a well-established fact. Moreover military doctrines, civil-military relations, and procurement practices may also affect countries' strategic culture.<sup>21</sup>
- **Social/Cultural.** Myths, symbols, and defining texts such as religious, historical, classical, and spiritual texts are considered part of all cultural groupings. All three can act as stabilising or destabilising factors in the evolution of strategic culture.<sup>22</sup> For example, Sun Tzu's *Art of War* permeates modern Chinese strategy, influencing everything— from deception to espionage to downplaying civilian control in favour of the state.<sup>23</sup>
- **Normative Pressure.** In his work *Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics* (1992), Alexander Wendt has analysed how norms influence identities and vice versa. According to him, norms significantly impact interactions between states.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, social institutions also play a critical role in shaping strategic culture. They provide a new understanding of norms and values

and possibly give shape to a new strategic culture based on the previous one. For example, because of their societies, the states in the Nordic region have now shifted to a strategic culture that is cosmopolitan in nature that is focused more on non-military conflict resolution.

- **Transnational Forces.** According to Darry Howlett, there is the possibility that strategic cultures may become more fluid in circumstances where transnational forces are operating across borders, thus complicating the chances of a peaceful settlement in case of inter-state conflicts.<sup>25</sup>

(Note: Transnational forces include non-state actors. Their role in influencing a state's strategic culture is yet to be explored).

### Criticism of Strategic Culture

- **Risk of oversimplifying the social world.** Some culturists remind us of essential caveats in the study of strategic culture, including that in seeking to identify causal relations there is a risk of oversimplifying the social world, and consequently, categories from one case may be applied inappropriately in the other case.<sup>26</sup>
- **Misinterpretation of attributes.** Inadequate knowledge of given strategic culture may lead to misinterpretation of attributes such as pride, honour, duty, security and stability.<sup>27</sup>
- **Over-reliance.** Even long-term proponents of cultural interpretation warns of potential pitfalls that accompanies an over-reliance by the policymaker on the insights that the concerned area of knowledge can provide.

### Case Study: Pakistan's Strategic Culture

Pakistan considers India as an 'existential threat'<sup>28</sup>, which makes Pakistan a territorially revisionist state that seeks:<sup>29</sup>

- To gain control over the territory of Jammu and Kashmir.
- To resist India's rise in the international forum.<sup>30</sup>

According to power transition theory, a revisionist state is a state that wants to change the status quo in the international system. In the case of Pakistan, its revisionism is limited to its desire to change its borders with India.<sup>31</sup> This revisionism motivated it to start wars in

1947-48, 1965, and 1999, all of which it failed to win. It also motivates Pakistan to continue a proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir (J & K).<sup>32</sup>

However, there are several ramifications of Pakistan's obsession with revisionism. According to Christine Fair, pursuing territorial gains in J & K has imposed a high cost on the Pakistani state. It has indirectly affected the security of Pakistani citizens and the state's political stability. The militants or terrorists, trained and supplied by Pakistan's intelligence agencies, have been targeting its civilians, military, and intelligence institutions. Fair argued that, the revisionist goals of Pakistan endures despite the accretion of evidence that the country cannot achieve J&K even modestly at present and is less likely to prevail in the future as India's power differential continues to expand. In his work *Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration* (2009), John Glenn stated that "strategies that fail to attain a state's objective will inevitably evolve or be abandoned".<sup>33</sup> Then why does Pakistan pursue revisionism? The answer to Pakistan's consistent adherence to revisionism lies in its strategic culture. The strategic culture of Pakistan is based on four strategic beliefs<sup>34</sup> and derived from four potential sources.

### ***Potential Sources of Pakistan's Strategic Beliefs***

The potential sources of Pakistan's strategic culture are military organisations, elite beliefs, historical experiences and geography. This is because "as an organisation, the military has built its image as the countervailing force capable of challenging 'belligerent India'—providing relief during natural disasters, intervening in times of political anarchy and playing an undeniably crucial role in the fight against terrorism. This has helped the armed forces to earn a tangible place within the Pakistani society".<sup>35</sup> Therefore, when scholars discuss Pakistan's strategic culture, it primarily reflects the outlook of Pakistan's Army.

- ***Strategic Belief 1: Pakistan is an insecure and incomplete state.***<sup>36</sup> The source of the belief is 'historical experience and elites'. Pakistan believes that it is born from an 'inherently unfair partition process'. The country considers itself not an equal inheritor of the institutions of the British Raj. The belief poses constant pressure on Pakistan to maintain its foundation. As per this belief, Pakistan's strategy is to defend its ideological and geographical frontiers. For defence, Pakistan has 'instrumentalised Islam'. General Ayub Khan saw reliance on Islam to overcome Pakistan's various



weaknesses that stem from the divisive ethnic aspirations among the peoples who found themselves trapped within it, often against their will.<sup>37</sup> Several military journals of Pakistan argues that using Islam as an ideology offers several strategic benefits, such as building national character and better recruits to the armed forces.<sup>38</sup> The Pakistan Army also has induced a belief in society that it has to finish the "unfinished" process of partition and merge the entire Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan. By 1971, Pakistan's defence experts started positing that the acquisition of nuclear weapons would provide opportunities for Pakistan to employ low-intensity conflict with impunity.<sup>39</sup>

- **Strategic Belief 2: Afghanistan as a source of instability.**<sup>40</sup> The potential source of this strategic belief is 'geography'. Pakistan believes that it has inherited the most dangerous frontiers of the British Raj i.e. the borders with Afghanistan, but received a small fraction of Raj's resources to manage it.<sup>41</sup> Pakistan's apprehensions vis-à-vis Afghanistan has its origin in its early relations. Afghanistan rejected Pakistan's bid to join the United Nations (UN). It also rejected the Durand Line as the boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan and made claims in Baluchistan, the North-West Frontier Province, and the Federally Administrative Tribal Areas (FATA). There is a conviction within the Pakistan Army that threats emanating from India and Afghanistan are intertwined. The Army argues that the unsuitable regime in Afghanistan (with Indian assistance) can destabilise Pakistan.<sup>42</sup> The Pakistan Army firmly believes that "active Indian presence in Afghanistan is pushing Pakistan towards a two-front war".<sup>43</sup>

Fair states that to manage its apprehensions of Afghan intransigence and India-Afghanistan collusion to destabilise Pakistan, Pakistan has consistently relied on the policy of "strategic depth".<sup>44</sup> It is to note that for Pakistan, the concept of strategic depth political implications rather than physical. The Pakistan Army has sought to cultivate a regime in Afghanistan that is favourably disposed towards Pakistan while hostile to India.

For strategic depth, Pakistan pursues the political structure developed by the British in the early nineteenth century. The Britishers followed two policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan: *First*, the forward policy, which is direct military intervention and,



second, the close border policy, which is defending the borders of the British Raj.<sup>45</sup> Pakistan has also retained the colonial-era FATA governance structure because it provides numerous advantages to the Pakistan Army. For example, Pakistan uses FATA as a training site from which militants could efficiently operate. Pakistan has also developed other tools, such as political Islam and Islamic militancy, to manage politics in Afghanistan. The most prominent tool is Pakistan's unfenced support to the Taliban.

- **Strategic Belief 3: India opposes the existence of Pakistan.**<sup>46</sup> Within the 'military and elites', there is a conviction that India cannot countenance Pakistan's existence as a Muslim state and consequently seeks to dominate and destroy it. General Mohammed Ayub Khan offers the earliest synthesis of this ideation about India.<sup>47</sup> In his autobiography *Friends Not Masters: A Political Autobiography*, he stated: "India's hegemonic impulses, its implacable hostility to Pakistan, and the intolerance of Hindu priestly caste, the *Brahmins*, contends that India was not content with her present sphere of influence and she knew that Pakistan had the will and capacity to frustrate her expansionist designs. She wanted to browbeat us into subservience. All we wanted was to live as equal as honourable neighbours. It was Brahmin chauvinism and arrogance that had forced us to seek homeland of our own where we could order our life according to our thinking and faith".<sup>48</sup> He added that "India is unable to reconcile herself to our existence as a sovereign independent state. The Indian attitude can only be explained in pathological terms. The Indian leaders have a deep hatred for the Muslims... From the beginning, India is determined to make things difficult for us".<sup>49</sup> General Ayub's writings evince a belief that if Pakistan's two-nation theory fails, then the state itself would fail.<sup>50</sup> His regime actively promoted and solidified this ideology and secured its legitimacy within Pakistan. This conviction that India seeks to undermine, if not destroy, Pakistan became rampant by India's decisive victory in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war.

The Pakistan Army operationalises the belief by sustaining Pakistani citizens' appetite for an "indefinite civilisational war".<sup>51</sup> The Pakistan Army materially benefits from this belief, and thus they ensure that belief of 'existential threat' from India would sustain in the psyche of the public.<sup>52</sup> To manage this foundational fear of 'existential threat' from India, Pakistan has cultivated an ideological means called "Defensive

Jihad".<sup>53</sup> The Pakistan Army has cultivated the perception that, 'all wars with India are holy (jihad) and meant to defend the edifice of Islam'.<sup>54</sup>

- **Strategic Belief 4: India is a hegemon that must be resisted at all costs.**<sup>55</sup> The potential sources of this belief are 'military organisations and elites'. The earliest proponents of this belief staunchly argued that India's ambition is to absorb Pakistan and other neighbouring states. General Ayub Khan stated that India's ambition is to absorb Pakistan or turn it into a satellite. He said: "From the day of Independence, Pakistan was involved in a bitter and prolonged struggle for her very existence and survival ...Indian efforts in the field of foreign policy directed towards an aim—the isolation of Pakistan and its disintegration".<sup>56</sup> In 1971, Major Mohammed Aslam Zuberi repeated the same claim. He wrote: "Extremists [in India] still dream of Akhand Bharat (an undivided India). Even moderates would like to see Pakistan in a position of India's satellite".<sup>57</sup> Major Khalid Mehmud further supported this belief. In his work *India's Posture as a Regional Power (1985)*, he stated: "India has its peculiar perception of security for South Asia and wants to impose its security and the economic system upon the entire region...It also wants to restrict the foreign policy choices and options of its neighbours and wants them to make their policies compatible with the Indian Foreign Policy objectives".<sup>58</sup>

According to Ashley J Tellis, Pakistan perceives itself to be India's genuine peer competitor.<sup>59</sup> It believes that, it is the one nation within South Asia that has the capabilities to resist India's rise in the international system. In 2014, Munir Akram, a former ambassador of Pakistan to the United Nations, highlighted this belief. He stated: "India cannot feel free to play a great power role so long as it strategically tied down in South Asia by Pakistan".<sup>60</sup> The perception is dubious; however, Pakistan enduringly uses force and Jihadi terrorism to achieve its strategic objective of weakening India and securing political concessions.<sup>61</sup>

Pakistan takes considerable risks with India because for Pakistan 'doing nothing is equal to defeat'.<sup>62</sup> Pakistan's tool to resist India are training militants and promoting jihad under its nuclear umbrella.<sup>63</sup> These tools are attractive because they are relatively cheaper and offers plausible deniability.<sup>64</sup>

## Implications for India

- ***Pakistan introduces external states in the Indian Subcontinent.*** Pakistan's strategic belief compels it to introduce external actors in the Indian subcontinent. The rationale behind supporting the role of external states is to create parity with India. Previously, USA was the extra-regional player. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan received tremendous economic and military aids from the USA to train *mujahideen* to fight in Afghanistan. It is well known that Pakistan misused these aids in propagating terrorism against India. In recent years, Pakistan has seen a tremendous decline in US-Pakistan bilateral relation.<sup>65</sup> As the US-Pakistan relation slid down, Pakistan's relations with China became more comprehensive. Now, China is an extra-regional player in South Asia and is strongly backed by Pakistan. According to Husain Haqqani, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is seen as a strategic partnership that could deter India in Pakistan. China and Pakistan's "all-weather" alliance poses a significant geostrategic challenge for India's rise in the global system.
- ***De-stabilises South Asia.*** According to the hegemonic stability theory, economic openness and stability are most likely to happen when there is a single dominant state. In the context of South Asia, India could provide stability because it is geographically and economically more significant and politically stable. To resist the rise of India, Pakistan introduces external actors or extra-regional players and uses non-state actors such as terror groups and secessionists against India. In this scenario, the integration of South Asia is becoming poignantly intricate. As one can see, all the regional institutions – South Asia Regional Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) are significantly dysfunctional because of the unstable relationship between India and Pakistan.
- ***Hybrid Warfare and Use of Terrorism.*** Terrorist groups are essential foreign policy tools for Pakistan's Deep State to achieve their strategic objectives vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan. Asymmetric Warfare is relatively inexpensive for Pakistan while being effective and offering plausible deniability. Meanwhile, terrorism emanating

from Pakistan heavily impacts India. It has caused grave human security issues and stymied India's efforts to bring normalcy in J & K.

- ***Strategic Depth in Afghanistan.*** After the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, Imran Khan promptly said, Afghanistan had "broken the shackles of slavery". Along with him, many retired and serving generals are exultant that Pakistan will finally have "friends" in Afghanistan's polity. Several reports suggest that Pakistan tightly controls the Taliban Government's formation. This raises a serious question for India: Has Pakistan achieved strategic depth in Afghanistan? Many experts believe that it has not, as the Taliban has not cleared its position with respect to the Durand Line. However, there is high possibility that Pakistan would use Afghanistan's soil as a sanctuary for terror groups. Therefore, India must calculate its new security environment.

## Conclusion

There is a pertinent progressive need for the Indian policymakers to discuss the influence of culture on national strategy. Strategic culture leads to constructed narratives that are often espoused to mould the citizens' opinions and the international community. Pakistan's deep-state does this all the time and has successfully played on the minds of its people while getting only a lukewarm response from the international community. Nevertheless, India needs to dissect and dismantle such strategic beliefs and their sources & consequences. China too needs to be viewed from a similar lens.

Pakistan acts on certain strategic beliefs that are doggedly weaved by the Pakistan Army for their benefits at the cost of its nation. These strategic beliefs, when operationalised on the ground in form of tactics, have significant implications for India. The most important one is Pakistan sponsored terrorism. Therefore, India should covertly work on altering the strategic beliefs of Pakistan; for this, India has to stimulate the other potential sources of Pakistan's strategic culture like natural resources and political organisation, so that these sources could replace the persistent epicentre of Pakistan's strategic culture i.e. the military organisation.

## End Notes

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