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Realism and Culture: Divergence or Convergence?

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ABSTRACT

The Cultural turn in International Relations was to explain the puzzles left unresolved by the dominant theories, especially Realism. It looks at various dominant theories and assesses the gap that can be plugged by strategic cultural studies. However, it is not all it's cracked up to be. This paper takes pre-colonial India's military (in) effectiveness as a case study, and argues that the martial races-based recruitment into the army had a solid realist basis rather than the cultural. The article goes on to conclude that the strategic cultural theories primarily complement the various dominant theories rather than compete with them.

Keywords: Realism and culture, Divergence, Convergence, International relations

Why do countries from different cultures that otherwise appear similar generate varying amounts of military power? Why do nations from divergent cultures but with the same amount of resources produce similar capabilities? Various theoretical approaches to International Relations have answered these questions differently.

Classical realists, for example, attribute the difference to separate national characters. For Morgenthau, national character has a bearing on national power. "National character and national morale stand out both for their elusiveness from the point of view of rational prognosis and for their permanent and often decisive influence upon the weight a nation is able to put into the scales of international politics," wrote Morgenthau in his 1948 classic *Politics among Nations* (Morgenthau, 2014, 146-47).

Character is not static in nature and could be constantly renewed though. There are several other ambiguities. Is the character of a nation an outcome of the number of individuals which, within a collectivity, share the same character? Or is it situated above the individual psychology, on the level of culture? Also, each state has a strict hierarchy of values, one or several representations of exemplary life. The proprieties change from nation to nation. They also change within the same nation from time to time.

Raymond Aron therefore prefers using Montesquieu's "spirit of a nation" over national character as it emphasises both the share of culture and the historical heritage. A nation's diplomatic or strategic behaviour is the outcome of "habit or custom which geographical position and the experience of centuries have slowly transformed into a second nature" rather than character, speaking in the psychological sense of the term (Aron, 1966, p. 289).

For the neorealists, on the other hand, the above questions do not pose a problem at all. According to the neorealist theories, states that are part of an international system will, over time, produce same amount of military power from a given level of resources. Nations that 'socialise' with one another will come to have similar military organisations and similar military doctrines, despite internal social and cultural differences, because the system will force them to generate as much military power from a given amount of resources as the most successful member of the system (Waltz, 1979, pp. 124-128).

The process of 'socialisation' and 'selection' is,

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however, not instantaneous. Neorealist explanations, to be rigorous, have to specify the duration and extent to which culturally idiosyncratic military practices would persist, or else they would have to allow for indefinitely long "lags" during which idiosyncratic practices survived.

The strategic culture perspective emerged to address these limitations. Coined by Jack Snyder to understand differing Soviet and American nuclear strategic doctrines, strategic culture could be defined as the "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 nuclear strategy" (Johnston, 1995, p. 36, fn. 8). It explains strategic behaviour by highlighting the importance of differences in culture. It holds that the uses of military power will vary because the subjective ideas in the minds of strategic elites and will lead them to view the same facts of international life differently, with different consequences for their strategies. The concept, however, turns out to be difficult to operationalise and appears more concerned with how military power is used than with how much power can be genetated from a given amount of material resources.

Some scholars, in their quest for answers, have looked at the social structure of a country. Social structures, in their opinion, provide better explanation to the above puzzles than established theoretical approaches. However, many sociologists would consider social structures as a subset of culture rather than a seperate explanatory variable. This paper too takes social structures to be part of the larger culture.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the first section summarises the debate between realism and culturalism. Next I take a case study trying to explain the above puzzles through cultural variables. I conclude that neoclassical realist theory can better explain the case than cultural theories.

Culture Returns:

Cultural theories have been around since World War II. In fact, we already had two distinct phases till the Cold War. The sudden end of the Cold War dealt a death blow not only to the Soviet Union but also to the mainstream theoretical explanations- especially the realist ones- in International Relations. The challenge obviously came from a resurgent culturalist camp.

The post-Cold War wave of culturalism in security studies differs from its previous avatars in the sense that it represents a broad research program with a wide array of research focuses. These approaches adopt a diverse range of epistemologies (from the stated positivist to the explicitly antipositivist) and embrace a wide variety of explanatory variables.

What unites these diverse perspectives is their dissatisfaction with realist explanations for state behaviour in the realm of national security. "All (cultural theories) take realist edifice as target," writes Alistair Iain Johnston, "and focus on cases where structural-materialist notions of interest cannot explain a particular strategic choice" (Johnston, 1995, p.41). Realism's emphasis on factors like polarity and material balance of power is overrated, the new generation culturalists contend. Some of the antipositivists take a hard stance *vis-a-vis* realism and hold that material and structural variables are of secondary importance. They also maintain that cultural theories that draw on ideational factors do a much better job of explaining how the world functions. Before we further delve into the the criticisms mounted by the latest wave of culturalists against realism and see if they hold any water, a brief overview of the various phases of culturalism is in order.

The first wave[1] or World War II wave was largely preoccupied with efforts to deal with the Axis powers. During the war, the Allied powers— mainly the United States— hired a large number of cultural anthropologists to produce "national character" studies of the Axis nations, especially of Germany and Japan. Many of these writings were characterised by extreme form of generelisations (Aron, 1966, p. 291). These analyses were also undermined by the fact that they were not based on extensive field studies, but on the secondary literature available in wartime America.

As the war came to an end, the first wave faded soon into oblivion largely as a result of the nuclear revolution. The development and deployment of nuclear weapons gave rise to the belief that the destructive power latent in nuclear technology would generate roughly similar behaviour from both the superpowers. The nuclear revolution rendered cultural differences largely irrelevant,

1. There is no consensus over classification of strategic culture among scholars. See for example Desch (1998), Johnston (1995) and Lock (2010). I follow the typology suggested by Desch because it treats World War II as a separate phase and thus takes into account the strategic culture debate from the very beginning

so went the argument. It ushered in theories influenced by rational actor and rational choice assumptions of economics.

The second wave (or Cold War phase) could be divided into two distinct phases. The early second wave was trying mainly to explain why the Soviets and the Americans thought differently about nuclear strategy. Scholars argued that the opposing nuclear doctrines of both the superpowers were the outcome of unique variations in macro- environmental variables like historical experience, political culture and geography.

For Colin Gray, the American national historical experience engendered "modes of thought and action with respect to force" that led to a unique set of "dominant national beliefs" about strategic choice (Gray, 1981, p. 22, 26). These beliefs produced a specific American approach to nuclear strategy which abhorred nuclear war fighting owing to the human costs involved rendering any meaning of victory senseless.

The US could maintain technological prowess to provide effective nuclear deterrence in the face of growing Soviet nuclear stockpile and that greater strategic stability could be restored by involving them in arms control dialogue. Implict in Gray's argument was the suggestion that the US was generally incapable of thinking strategically about planning, fighting and winning a nuclear war and thus at a disadvantage *vis-a-vis* the Soviet Union.

Three levels of imputs, David Jones maintains, go into the making of a state's strategic culture. These are: a macro-environmental level comprising of geography, ethno-cultural factors and history; a societal level made of social, economic and political structures of a country; and a micro-level involving military institutions and features of civil-military relations (Johnston, 1995, p. 37). The strategic culture not just delimits a state's strategic options; but it pervades all levels of choice from grand strategy down to tactics. Soviet Union's offensive grand strategies were the outcome of these three levels of variables.

Such arguments were discredited beyond repair with the USSR foundering in Afghnaistan with its supposedly 'superior' strategic and political culture and its subsequent imploding in the Cold War against an America found wanting in strategic culture.

To add to it, there were other conceptual shortcomings in these early second generation works. The concept of strategic culture, for one thing, was all-emcompassing and too unwieldy. Many of the variables incorporated into the definition could stand by itself as a separate explanation of strategic choice. It also rendered any valid test of a strategic culture-based model extremely difficult. Also by subsuming patterns of behaviour ino its fold, it implied that strategic thought led regularly to one type of behaviour. This conclusion resembled many mechanically deterministic cultural arguments and also ignored ample counter-evidence. Finally, it was problematic to consider a society's strategic culture frozen in time.

The later second wave considered strategic culture to be a tool of political hegemony in the realm of strategic decision-making. Bradley Klein argued that strategic culture established "widely available orientations to violence and to ways in which the state can legitimately use violence against putative enemies" (Klein, 1988, p. 136). It distinguished between a declaratory strategy and an operational strategy. While the declaratory strategy legitimised the authority of those in command of strategic decision- making, the operational strategy reflected the specific interests of decision makers.

It was not clear, however, if there was any correlation between strategic discourse and behaviour. The process of socialization applied to the strategic elites too and could trap them in the strategic myths created by their predecessors. This later wave also appeared uncertain whether to expect cross-national differences in operational strategy. On the one hand, it appeared that because certain strategic options were unthinkable, the range of choices availabe to states differed across strategic cultures. On the other hand, there was an implicit assumption that elites across the world accentuated the "us-them" dichotomy, and thus painted a bleak vision of the external world. These images conjured up the zero-sum notions of international conflict and beliefs in the efficacy of force.

The third wave (or the current post-Cold War phase) is an expansive research program with a diverse range of research focuses. It is more rigorous than the earlier phases and ecletic in its conceptualisation of ideational independent variables, and more narrowly focused on specific strategic decisions as independent variables. Incorporated within its fold are four broad strands of cultural theorising— organisational, political, strategic and global. For example, Elizabeth Kier shows what determines the choice between offensive and defensive military doctrine. Challenging the extant realist

explanations, she shows how France in the 1920s and 1930s adopted a defensive military doctrine because of its domestic political and military organisational factors, intense systemic pressure notwithstanding (Kier, 1995, 1996). Similarly, Thomas Berger argues how domestic political attitudes lead Japan and Germany to defy the structural logic towards the use of force. Not only have Germany and Japan failed to assume a more independent defence posture, but they have also shied away from assuming a larger security role within the context of multilateral institutions (Berger, 1996).

Alistair Iain Johnston, on the other hand, holds that domestic strategic culture (the *parabellum* strategic culture) best explains China's grand strategy, rather than international systemic imperatives (Johnston, 1996). Martha Finnemore and Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald maintain that global cultural norms influence the decisions behind humanitarian intervention and taboo on the use of particular weapons respectively (Finnemore, 1996, Price and Tannenwald, 1996).

Unlike the earlier phases, the sources of cultural values in the latest wave are rooted in more recent practice and experience than history. It also avoids the determinism of earlier generation as it laeves behaviour out of the independent variable's fold. The improvement comes as many of the scholars working in this tradition conceptualise culture in such a manner so as to allow it to vary.

This generation is also more open to competitive theory testing, pitting alternative explanations against each other. Such an attempt lends methodological rigour to the latest wave of cultural theorising. The newest wave has taken the battle to realism's home-turf, national security. Realism can better explain the national security issues, so goes the conventional wisdom. All the contributors to *The Culture of National Security* have looked at national security issues through the cultural prism.

The third phase is again plagued by certain conceptual inconsistencies. Given its emphasis on strategic choices not explained well by neorealism has certain drawbacks. Neorealism- being a research program- suggests state preferences ranging from mere survival to power maximisation. Hence, the optimal strategies could also vary accordingly. Thus, in order to test ideational or cultural models against realist ones, the former invariably ends up using some arbitrarily determinant version of realism.

By using organisational culture as a key independent variable, the third generation neglects the arguments made by later second wave scholars like Klein, where he distinguishes between the declared and operational doctrines. In certain instances, where military doctrine is an independent variable (Kier), the question of distinction between the two doctrines remain under-explored.

Third, it defines culture as: "... either present(ing) decision-makers with limited range of options or it act(ing) as a lens that alters the appearance and efficacy of different choices" (Johnston, 1995, p.42). This definition needs certain other variables to explain why particular choices are finally made. Put differently, if organizational culture creates choices which, in the process of policymaking, limit options available to decision-makers, where does the preference-ranking that governs choice among these limited options come from? To add to it, if culture is neither considered a reflection of an individual's beliefs nor a mere aggregation of beliefs captured by modal points in a distribution of beliefs, then a person will not be completely socialised in that culture; no individual will share all the cultural predispositions of any other. But in times of foreign policy crises, a small number of policy makers usually make strategic choices. If these individuals do not completely reflect the values of a military or strategic culture, then this diminishes the connection between those values and the behavior, since the relationship is mediated by individuals who are not wholly representative of that culture. If this is the case, the power of culture as an independent variable weakens considerably. Whether the new wave Culturalism better explains social reality than realism is to frame the question in terms of binary opposition. No realist— least of all, the neorealists— has ever said that his theory is all-explanatory and could explain every social phenomenon. Kenneth Waltz, for example, has said that his theory could only explain certain big things in international social and political life, not all the things. "One must ask how and to what extent the structure of a realm accounts for outcomes," he writes (Waltz, 1979, p.78). Structure tends to establish parameters; actual outcomes are sometimes determined by other factors.

Both realism and culturalism are research programs rather than specific theories. A research program is a set of theories that share same core assumptions, but they may have different auxillary assumptions. This, in turn, could lead them to generate very different predictions about the same case. On the other hand, theories belonging

to disparate research programs could make similar predictions about the same case. Hence, instead of pitting culturalism against realism, Desch suggests, one should look at specific set of theories that vary along the domestic versus international and material versus ideational dimensions (Desch, 1998, p. 155).

Writing about the contributions in *The Culture of National Security,* Paul Kowert and Jeffery Legro argue that "...while this volume identifies shortcomings in the micro- and macrofoundations of mainstream approaches, it does not reject realism, liberalism, or their structural variants out of hand". "In a broad analytical sense," they further write, "there is a more complementary relationship between the sociological perspectives and these more traditional approaches" (Kowert and Legro, 1996, p.496).

Even Peter Katzenstein, a leading name in culturalism, has admitted that he is "not interested in theorizing per se but in solving puzzles" (Desch, 1998, p. 152' fn.62). It is, therefore, important not to pit culturalism against realism, but to see if they could jointly provide better explanations of international political phenomenon. Certain scholars have suggested the possibility of such a cooperation between neoclassical realism and few variants of strategic culture. John Glenn argues that the chances of such a collaboration between neoclassical realism and epiphenomenal (which explains deviation of state behaviour from general patterns predicted by neorealism) and conventional constructivists (that generates contingent generalisations of state behaviour with norms and culture as alternative explanatory variables) strategic cultures is very high (Glenn, 2009). Such an approach, in my opinion, could well lead to progress of knowledge.

However, the case I chose proves that neoclassical realists could as better explain the puzzle at hand than the culturalist explanations. This does not imply privileging neoclassical realism over culturalism.

A Case pitting Realism against Culturalism:

Why did India through out its history, at least before the advent of the British rule, succumb to invaders from its Northwest border? Why did India fail to successfuly resist these attacks? Why did the British East India Company, despite being outnumbered and with roughly similar weapons technology, prevail over the Indians in the 18th and early 19th centuries? Stephen Peter Rosen poses these questions in *Societies and Military Power: India and Its Armies*- a study on the relationship between societies and the military power they generate (Rosen, 1996).

To add credence to his theory, he compares armies that are matched in numbers of men and in quality of weapons, or matched in some other ways, and scrutinises armies that defeated armies having larger number of troops and better weapons. The military effectiveness of winning armies, in his opinion, lay in social structures.

He considers Indian armies involved in battles in four distinct historical phases:

(1) Ancient, from 500 BC- 500 AD, (2) Medieval, the Delhi Sultanates from 1206-1516, and the Mughal Empire from 1526- 1707, (3) Early British Indian colonial, from 1740- 1817 and (4) Post-independence, from 1947-1994.

Rosen sets up a 'controlled experiment' to test the relationship between social structure and the military. He has chosen for consideration the battles in each period in which armies did not win due to greater numbers, better weapons or diplomacy, but ones in which armies, faced with enemies equal or superior in numbers to themselves, and equal or superior in weaponry, won due to superior social organisation.

The arguments are organised around two independent variables: the "dominant social structures of a country and the social divisions they create, and the degree to which the military organisations divorce themselves from their society" (Rosen, 1996, p. ix). These variables are invoked to explain the amount of offensive and defensive military power generated from a given quantity of material resources and that efforts to seperate a military organisation from the influences of the dominant social structures have consequences for the amount of usable military power available to the state.

Social structures can affect the generation of military power in two ways. First, individuals in a political unit can identify themselves with social structures in ways that could create fragmented loyalties within the unit. This can create divisions in the unit that accetuate the effective military power of the unit taken together. Internal social divisions can increase the amount of military power required to maintain domestic order, reducing the extra military power that can be projected abroad. The chinks in the unit can also create internal vulnerabilities that enemies can exploit.

Second, these fissures created by social structures in the unit at large can be carried over into the military organisations of that unit, resulting in divisions that reduce

their effective military power. For example, in both the armies of the Delhi sultanate and the Mughals, Muslim soldiers and officers in battle killed Hindu soldiers and officers from their own armies. These were armies reflecting too much of the divisions within their societies, armies not enough seperated from their own societies. Military organisations may attempt to insulate themselves from the problems created by the social structures in the political unit. But this seperation from society may foment distrust of the military.

In a professional army, well seperated from its host society, soldiers' commitments to their army units outweigh their loyalties to their religion, class, caste or subcaste, as they experienced them before enlistment.

The separation of army from its host society means (1) the development of a well- trained professional army as soldiering becomes a fultime career, (2) an army trained particularly in co-ordinating among men of a unit of infantry, and between the specialised units and (3) an army so engrossed in itself that it can be used to defeat private armies within its own society with an eventual result in national monopoly of force.

One could infer from the examples presented in the first three chapters concerning pre-independence Indian armies that an army divorced from its host society was one in which soldiers could be trained more effectively and would fight more effectively than an army with close ties to society. One could also generalisation from the chapter on the post-independence Indian army is that it is too isolated from society - too isolated in at least three ways. Firstly, the continuation of single-class infantry units composed of single sub-castes like the jats and rajputs or single communities like the Sikhs, result in "small cohesive communities" that have "little to do with each other and even less to do with the society from which they come" (p. 215); cultural difference and social distance between battalions make military operations requiring co-operation above the battalion level very difficult.

Secondly, the army is too separated from society, because the army officials have been excluded from decision-making by the civilian leaders, from prime minister Nehru through Rajiv Gandhi (p. 231). Thirdly, contemporary army officers insulate themselves from a worldwide military discourse, even from a discourse about their own army's battles and wars. Rosen states: "...as of 1995 there were no official histories of any of India's major wars since independence... In the Infantry Journal, a professional journal published by the Infantry School at Mhow in India, there were only two brief articles critically reviewing the combat performance of the army in the 1965 war, none about the 1962 war, and one reviewing the 1971 war. There are similar lacunae in the more specialised professional military journal Combat and the more general United Service Institution of India Journal" (pp. 200-201).

The possibility that Indian armies might repeat their defeats because the enemy had more advanced techniques is suggested in high-level officers' seeming in differene to recent advances. Rosen claims that Indian army officers largely wrote off "sophisticated military technology" used in the US wars in Vietnam (p. 234) and in the Persian Gulf (p. 235) as irrelevant for the Indian army.

A not so convincing case:

Michael Desch, in his assessment of Rosen's work, rejects it claiming it provides little evidence to prove the larger point Rosen is making, *i.e.* Whether domestic, ideational approaches are better at explaining military effectiveness than the realist theories.

Realists do not make the case for states to have identical domestic structures. What realist theories expect is functional similarity among the great powers. They could, at the same time, have different internal structures and external behaviour owing to their respective geogeraphical position and the level of military technology. India was never a consistent central player in global politcs. Thus, expectations of military effectiveness from a peripheral player is preposterous (Desch, 1998, p. 159). Valid points, indeed.

Rosen's arguments, however, got traction as it raised concerns about the impact of recruiting so-called martial races on India's civil-military relations. Infact, he devotes an entire chapter to the Indian caste system, although what he says about it there seems to have very little to do with caste as it relates to Indian armies as that relationship comes out in subsequent chapters, where the issue is that of single-class infantry companies.

Rosen is not the first author to talk of martial races though. Stephen Cohen in his masterly study of the Indian army mentions how the idea of the martial races took shape. Lord Roberts of Kandhar— who serves as Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army from 1885 to 1893— is credited with introducing the policy of recruiting the so-called martial races.

Roberts was more interested in building up the

Indian Army to face the Russians, Cohen says, than in keeping it tied to internal security duties. In his opinion, Russians could not be faced with an army of inferiors. To meet the challenge posed by the Rusian Bear, he claimed, the best available material (recruits) came from the northwest quarter of India and the army could be recruited from that region. He was also a votary of the belief that class regiments fought better and the recruited classes should be thus organised (Cohen, 2001, p. 46). These arguments sound quite realist!

Also, the idea of martial races was designed to meet the growing deterioration of good officer corps. This recruitment pattern was not with problems though. As the British found out in 1914 and again in 1939, they could not expand rapidly due to restrictions on the "eligible" classes. The system was also not geared to receiving and adopting technological innovations, a quality much in need during the great wars.

Cohen also wondered if the army's rising levels of corruption, combined with increasing civilian mistreatment and interference, might raise the possibility of coup. He, however, reaches a different conclusion. The heterogeneous nature of the armed forces and their various commands, the civilan leadership's awareness of the risks, and the steps taken to hedge against these risks made military intervention least likely (Cohen, 2001, p. 218, pp. 222-223). One is reminded of the movement of Sikh troops from Ramgarh in Jharkhand towards Delhi after Operation Bluestar in 1984 and how they were checkmated. Rosen too shares these concerns about the eroding civil-military relations.

The question then arises why has army recruitment on martial lines not only survived, but is thriving well into the Twenty first Century. Why has the Indian Army resisted all attempts to implement reservations within its fold? Yale political scientist provides an answer to this puzzle.

Many Senior officers, Wilkinson argues in his latest work *Army and Nation*, are still convinced that there is a lot to be gained in terms of military effectiveness from deploying men in homogenous units with strong regimental and battalion traditions (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 180). Recruitment from specific groups, these officers argue, serves a number of military purposes: the policy helps build a cohesive unit, whose close bonds, common cultures, and regimental traditions encouraged men to fight hard, for the regiment and for each other. It has also been challenged in the Supreme Court of India as an "unmerited colonial hangover" that is "unworthy of secular India".

To further substantiate his case, Wilkinson invokes economists Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn's work on the American Civil War (1861-1865). In their assessment of the recruitment patterns, ethnicity and fighting using historical data for tens of thousands of men, they found that soldiers in more ethnically cohesive units were more likely to reenlist and less likely to mutiny and desert than soldiers from more mixed units. Cohesiveness seemes to have its rewards in military effectiveness.

Also, it is still much easier to create new battalions by forming them out of a core of exisiting servicemen and using exisiting regimental infrastructure to train them than it is to start an entirely new unit and build these fighting traditions from scratch.

In sum, neoclassical realist explanations that look at both the structural (the fear of Russians) and domestic (to meet shortage of officer corps and Costa & Kahn's persuasive case) provides much better explanation than the culturalist ones for India sticking to the martial races based recruitment.

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