SLEDOVÁNÍ POSUNŮ VE STRATEGICKÉ KULTUŘE
Analýza protipovstaleckého boje jako vzestupu strategické subkultury

TRACKING SHIFTS IN STRATEGIC CULTURE
Analyzing Counterinsurgency as a Rise of a Strategic Subculture

Tomáš Karásek

Abstrakt
Výzkum strategické kultury se obvykle věnuje jejím stálým rysům, zatímco možnost náhlých posunů klíčových charakteristik je většinou opomíjena. Se záměrem překonat tento problém představuje článek analytický rámec pro studium změny strategické kultury, který předpokládá klíčovou roli existujících strategických subkulturní. Užitečnost a meze aplikace tohoto přístupu jsou následně testovány na americké strategické kultuře po roce 2001, zvláště ve spojitosti se vzestupem doktrín protipovstaleckého boje během válek v Íráku a Afghánistánu.

Abstract
The research of strategic culture typically follows its permanent features, largely ignoring the possibility of abrupt shifts thereof. The article overcomes this deficiency by proposing a framework for analysing change in strategic culture, presuming a crucial role played by pre-existing strategic subcultures. The utility and limits of the new approach are then tested on the U.S. strategic culture after 2001, focusing specifically on the rise of counterinsurgency in connection to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Poděkování
Tato studie je výstupem z grantu GA16-02288S Anatomie revizionismu a jeho vliv na (sub-)regionální institucionalizace a aliance financovaném Grantovou agenturou České republiky

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INTRODUCTION: FROM STRATEGIC SURPRISE TO SHIFT IN STRATEGIC CULTURE

U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, initiated under the label of the ‘war on terror’, eventually evolved into complex ‘stabilization’ campaigns in which the coalitions under U.S. leadership turned to the counterinsurgency doctrine. Such an outcome is surprising. After the experience in Vietnam, American political and military establishment reaffirmed a strategic outlook that accentuated technological edge over the enemy, massive preponderance of military power, hesitance to commit forces to campaigns with less than clearly defined national interests and unwillingness to take strategic and tactical risks. In sum, these requirements seemed to inhibit U.S. participation in just the type of operations that it ended up fighting after 9/11.

Did the United States undergo a shift in its strategic culture after the terrorist attacks in 2001? And how can we know? Academics utilizing the concept, with rare exceptions, have been interested in strategic culture’s impact on strategic behaviour, i.e. the contemplation over and actual use of force. On the contrary, analysing how strategic culture changes under external and internal pressures has largely been omitted as a research topic. The main goal of this article is to fill this void by presenting a framework for the analysis of change in strategic culture, as well as demonstrating its utility and conceptual limits on the case of the ‘rise of counterinsurgency’.

The article starts with a brief characterization of strategic culture with a special focus on the issue of its change, outlining a possible method of dealing with the issue. The second part of the article looks at a specific category of a ‘shift’ in strategic culture through the prism of the agency-structure relationship, identifying a ‘strategic surprise’ as a possible starter of such a process. Against the background of the author’s definition of strategic culture, the paper then develops an analogy of the concept of metaphorical ‘sedimentation’ as a methodological tool for analysing the process of change in strategic culture. In the final two chapters, the (re)emergence of counterinsurgency in response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is used as a demonstration of the utility of the concept.

Go Study Something Else? Change in the Theory of Strategic Culture
Jack Snyder first introduced strategic culture as a theoretical tool in 1977. Its various conceptualizations, which have since been developed, broadly encompass two basic components of the term, namely ‘strategic behaviour’ (defined by Gray as a threat or use of force for political purposes) and ‘culture’, characterized again by Gray as “ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits of mind, preferred methods of operation specific to a geography-based community with a unique historical experience.” Due to continuing arguments about its nature, Haglund famously characterized the ongoing debate as an “unintelligible in pursuit of the incomprehensible.” Some comfort can be taken from Johnston’s division of the study of the phenomenon into three ‘generations’: the first, ‘holistic’, understanding strategic culture as “a context out there that surrounds and gives meaning to strategic behaviour”; the second, ‘critical’, unmasking it as a “tool of political hegemony in the field of strategic decision-making”; and finally the third, ‘positivist’, highlighting the interplay between strategic culture as an independent and strategic decisions as a dependent variable, against a list of competing intervening variables.

Strategic culture’s theoreticians do not believe the concept to be immutable. Johnston’s discursively oriented approach clearly takes the possibility of its gradual development into account. Gray explicitly acknowledges that “strategic culture(s) can change over time, as new experience is absorbed, coded, and culturally translated.” He warns, however, that “culture (...) changes slowly. Scholars who prefer to look only to recent history as the determining influence upon contemporary strategic culture, would be well advised to change concepts.” His not so subtle recommendation to go study something else reverberates strongly throughout the field.

However, under certain circumstances a change in strategic culture can be rather dramatic. History is not short on such examples. Germany’s strategic culture was reconstituted after World War II in conscious opposition to previous preferences, most

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1 SNYDER, Jack L. The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options, R-2154-1F. Santa Monica, Ca.: Rand Corporation, 1977; As Haglund correctly notes, the contents of what came to be known as strategic culture were clearly treated by various scholars before the aforementioned date, see HAGLUND, David G. ‘Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off’? Security Culture as Strategic Culture. SCHMIDT, Peter - ZYLA, Benjamin (eds.). European Security Policy and Strategic Culture. London and New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 12-13. ISBN: 978-1-138-94430-5.
6 GRAY, ref. 2, p. 50
7 JOHNSTON, ref. 5, p. 39
8 Ibid, p. 41
9 GRAY, ref. 2, p. 52
10 Ibid
notably the Nazi expansionist (ab)use of militarism.\textsuperscript{11} In a similar fashion, some authors regard strategic culture in Central European countries before 1989 largely irrelevant for their analysis as democratic states after the fall of communism.\textsuperscript{12} These two examples represent a radical ‘reversal’ in which new political elites consciously reject the dominant features of the previous strategic culture and replace it with a near perfect opposite. Between the opposite ends of the spectrum, one represented by continuous adaptation, the other by a sudden, abrupt reversal, lurks a third possibility: a ‘shift’ in strategic culture too prominent to be discarded as ‘adaptation as usual’, yet not so radical as to warrant being treated as an exception to the general rule. Such a change would need to be induced by an extraordinary situation which leaves the strategic culture seriously shaken, replying to the challenge by shifting its emphasis, modes of operation, discourse, institutional focus and other facets.

Alan Bloomfield stands out among scholars of strategic culture for his attempt at charting the way out of the ‘changing-but-not-changing’ conundrum. While critiquing the conceptualizations of strategic culture for being ‘too coherent’ or emphasizing ‘too much continuity’ (or, in some cases, suffering from both), he recently developed a model of strategic culture “which contains ‘contradictory elements’, various ‘strains’ or ‘traditions’ or (...) competing subcultures.”\textsuperscript{13} In his proposal, the subcultures “coexist and compete for influence over the making of strategic decisions.”\textsuperscript{14} Significantly, Bloomfield does not foresee the situation of multiple strategic subcultures to resemble necessarily ‘balance of power’, noting that some of the subcultures can be “subordinate, and so of only limited influence but still ‘waiting in the wings’.”\textsuperscript{15} Thanks to the dynamic interpretation of strategic culture, this scenario provides a theoretical backbone for the development of an analytical portfolio of its change in this article. However, while acknowledging the existence of a wide scale of possible changes in strategic culture, as outlined above, due to the reasons explained at the beginning of the next chapter it will focus primarily on ‘shifts’ in strategic culture, linking them to the notion of a ‘strategic surprise’. It thus presumes an externally induced but internally developed (by ‘agents of change’ arising from a given strategic subculture), clearly discernable deviation from long-standing maxims which still falls short of a total replacement of the previous set of strategic preferences.

\textbf{STRUCTURES, AGENTS AND STRATEGIC SURPRISE: CONCEPTUALIZING A SHIFT IN STRATEGIC CULTURE}


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. 452

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid
John Lewis Gaddis defines ‘strategic surprise’ as an:

“...event that is sufficiently dramatic in the way it happens, sufficiently sweeping in its implications, and - most of all - sufficiently unexpected, that it causes us all to drop whatever it is we’re doing and glue ourselves to the global equivalent of the old town crier, CNN.”

Gaddis suggests that a single event can cause a reappraisal in the way political elites think, reason and act. In such a case, the world as we know it does not come to an end (as it did for Germany or Japan at the end of WWII) but we are forced to see it through a thoroughly different lens. What stands out is the event’s ability to lend itself to discursive interpretations which transform it into an ‘epic event’, a fresh narrative which throws a new light onto the understanding of the situation. Besides the ontological implications, a ‘shift’ also has epistemological consequences. A strategic shock narrows down the scope of available reactions and thus makes ensuing decision-making processes more transparent and concentrated. This could make tracking changes through shifts rather than through long-term adjustment a preferable option for empirical research. In the case of 9/11, it can be argued that the relevance of the ‘shock’ got prolonged by the subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The encounters with local armed resistance marked a distinct departure from previous U.S. military operations in 1990s and can be considered a series of aftershocks in their own right.

As for the mechanism of the ‘shift’, the ‘epic’ qualities of a strategic surprise suggest that actions by ‘discursive agents’ are the single most relevant determinant of such a change. This corresponds with Bradley Klein’s notion of “alternatives to strategic discourse” as well as with Bloomfield’s notion of subcultures. These subcultures do not necessarily reject the dominant culture but rather constitute a correction or supplement thereof. We can also think about them as reservoirs of concepts for exactly the moment when standard solutions cannot cope with an unusual challenge. A strategic subculture - i.e., a “group of people with a culture (whether distinct or hidden) which differentiates them from the larger culture to which they belong” - might therefore persevere as an alternative or additional set of strategic preferences. From this perspective, strategic surprise opens a window of opportunity for the representatives of these subcultures as ‘agents of change’ who try to broaden the appeal of their cherished ideas and policy preferences.

Further thinking about the mechanism of possible changes in strategic culture brings to the fore the problem of mutual constitution between an agent and a structure. As Wendt claims, “human agents and social structures are, in one way or another, theoretically interdependent and mutually implicating entities (...) It is then plausible step to believe that the properties of agents and those of social structures are both

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relevant to explanations of social behavior.”\textsuperscript{19} While highly theoretical, Wendt’s or Carl Snaes’s\textsuperscript{20} efforts at re-conceptualizing the agency-structure conundrum actually serve as an important guideline for the study of change in strategic culture. Their basic ontological claim highlights the intertwined nature of agents and structures that stands at the core of the proposed mechanism of a ‘shift’ in strategic culture. Each strategic (sub)culture represents a structure which determines the behaviour of agents within its framework. At the same time, it is a product of these agents’ discourses, practices, norms, and ideas. The agents and their surrounding structures thus form a feedback loop, or, in Wendt’s term, mutual constitution, that is difficult to cut into its founding elements. But a ‘strategic surprise’ helps us separate the dyad, highlighting the actions of the agents and allowing us to follow their impact on their structural surroundings. While this moment clearly does not represent a solution to the general conundrum troubling Carl Snaes and Wendt, it does provide an analytical equivalent of a stop motion, thus making it possible to sequence the changes under way. It is suggested that the chain of effects put in motion by a strategic surprise can lead agents of a subculture to attempt transmitting their preferences towards the dominant strategic culture, not the least because the boundaries between the two are weakened by the perceived instability of the situation, or the dominant culture’s inability to deal with the new challenges:

Table 1: Change in strategic culture as a process of sedimentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>process of change / strategic culture component</th>
<th>marginalization</th>
<th>acceptance</th>
<th>dominance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>discourse</td>
<td>strategic subculture exists as a ‘fringe’ opinion, tolerated but sidelined</td>
<td>main ideas of the subculture are accepted as a relevant part of the strategic assessment, the subculture gets incorporated in the mainstream discourse</td>
<td>ideas of the original subculture become a new dominant component of the strategic discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doctrine</td>
<td>no specific doctrine exists for the strategic subculture</td>
<td>a doctrine is created which embodies the main ideas of the subculture</td>
<td>the original subculture becomes a dominant force which shapes the national defence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Before operationalizing the ‘shift’, it is first necessary to define strategic culture itself. Given the aforementioned plurality of approaches, this is not easy. However, since the goal of this article is not to determine the effects of strategic culture on decision-making, but, in reverse, to study influences of a strategic subculture on a dominant strategic culture, a synthetic approach appears in order. The goal is to posit multiple possible layers on which the actions of the ‘agents of change’ might leave an imprint. Special attention is devoted to discourse as the base of such a process. While debates continue to rage concerning what constitutes strategic culture, discursive construction of its basic tenets seems beyond doubt in all approaches. This stance includes the second generation’s focus on the discursive construction of strategic culture and the existence of ‘strategic subcultures’ while also assuming that strategic discourse is real, not a mere ploy to disguise hidden intentions of participating agents. The discursive element of strategic culture is interpreted in this article, in accordance with Johnston’s definition, as an “an integrated system of symbols (i.e., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors, etc.).”\(^{21}\)

The remaining elements of strategic culture are based on Gray’s idea of three ‘clusters’: ‘people and politics’, ‘preparation for war’ and ‘war proper’.\(^{22}\) The first cluster is ‘translated’ as institutions, understood in this context as formal organizations involved in the process of strategic decision-making. From the second cluster, the notion of doctrines is extracted, in order to underline the importance of the codified, written ‘objects’ where strategic thought typically (but, of course, not exclusively), resides. The third cluster, expressing the interconnection between culture and behaviour, gets summed up as operations, i.e. the implementation of strategic preferences into (military) action. The resulting definition of strategic culture claims that it is a set of discursive, institutional, doctrinal and operational structures that underlie strategic decision-making, i.e. against whom, under what circumstances and how (military) force is to be used.

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\(^{22}\) GRAY, ref. 2, p. 53
Before proceeding further, it is necessary to qualify the relation between the concepts of strategic culture and military culture. David Ha glund dealt with a similar issue when assessing mutual relevance of a European strategic versus security culture, coming to a conclusion that sharply distinguishing between the two does not make much sense. This article adopts a sympathetic stance, taking military culture as a subset of a broader (national) strategic culture, i.e. an established set of ideas and practices on how to (and how not to) use force. The two categories remain distinct, but for practical purposes it is assumed that the views of military professionals are reflected (and possibly mirrored) by policy-makers, and vice versa. In the U.S. case, it can be argued that the military culture is especially relevant to the broader strategic culture given the propensity of the system to bestow a large degree of autonomy of the leadership of the armed forces once a war is started - as explained in more detail below.

The matrix of four dimensions of strategic culture could follow a specific implementation logic. When thinking about a shift in strategic culture, provoked by a strategic surprise, it can be naturally assumed that the first line of the offensive of those critical of the standing dominant strategic preferences would be discursive, hurling metaphors, historical analogies and other argumentative ammunition at their mainstream opponents. If successful (i.e. being ‘heard’ in the relevant public arena), the next move would target the institutions as critically important instruments of exerting and exercising political power. Control thereof would then naturally lead to a formulation and ratification of doctrinal documents that generally serve the purpose of ratifying mainstream discursive preferences. Finally, having established their position, proponents of a (newly acknowledged or even dominant) strategic subculture would utilize their newfound influence by testing their preference in action - closing the full circle.

While neat and seductive, this picture of a step-by-step shift in strategic culture can also be misleading. Especially in times of political disarray, social processes would tend to be haphazard and overlapping. An argument in support of the possibility of a parallel development can be made, using a theoretical analogy: In his study of integration processes in European foreign and security policy, Jakob Øhrgaard similarly dismantled the process of spillover into its constitutive parts: socialization, cooperation and formalization. He made a strong point for accepting possible overlaps of the three processes in time, despite their apparent mutual impact on one another. As the subsequent analysis of the ‘rise of counterinsurgency’ in the United States demonstrates, there are strong empirical reasons to believe that interconnectivity and lack of sequencing can indeed go hand in hand.

To ‘measure’ the scope of a shift in strategic culture, this paper takes inspiration from the research of political metaphors, as presented by Drulák. To analyse the process

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23 HAGLUND, ref. 4.
through which a metaphor gets established as a relevant and legitimate part of the prevailing discourse, Drulák, referring to a previous work by Waever, uses the concept of ‘sedimentation’ to characterize “how deeply entrenched a particular metaphorical structure can be.” He recognizes three stages of the process: unconventional, conventional and sedimented metaphors.

This three-stage scheme offers a fitting analogy to the process through which a strategic culture shifts. The starting stage denotes the position of a strategic subculture which is tolerated but marginalized (“waiting in the wings”, as Bloomfield put it). Given the locus of the counterinsurgency enthusiasts in the U.S. armed forces, the term unconventional used by Drulák is actually (if by sheer coincidence) very fitting. The second stage points to the moment when new concepts enter and are accepted by the dominant discourse, thus becoming conventional in the aforementioned sense used by Drulák, or accepted by the mainstream discourse. Finally (and ever more hypothetically), as the original subculture expands, it replaces the original strategic culture and becomes a new strategic paradigm - reaching a sedimented stage with the power of factuality attributed to it by Johnston, “changing the state’s strategic policy profoundly.” However, since the terms ‘conventional’ and ‘unconventional’ have a specific meaning in relation to military affairs, this paper adjusts Drulák’s and Waever’s terms, in accordance with the meanings attached to the phases above, to marginalization, acceptance and dominance. The process is understood to concern the aforementioned four elements of strategic culture - discourse, doctrine, institutions and operational use.

In accord with the aforementioned framing of the agency-structure problem, in each of the phases at every layer of strategic culture, an interaction between an agent of the subculture and the dominant culture’s structure is expected. As indicated, for the purpose of this research, the interaction is conceived as one-sided, i.e. an attempt of the agent to transplant certain features of his subculture into the dominant stream of strategic thinking and practice. As a result, the empirical illustration of the concept (on the case of the ‘rise of counterinsurgency’) highlights both the agents’ activities in favour of change and the imprint they leave on the dominant culture’s components.

FROM ANNIHILATION TO IMMACULATE DESTRUCTION: THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. STRATEGIC CULTURE BEFORE AND AFTER 9/11

The history of U.S. strategic culture starts, as Weigley reminds us, with a twin success of George Washington’s ‘strategy of attrition’ and Nathaniel Greene’s ‘strategy of partisan war’. The U.S. later assumed a position of power that relegated the latter

27 DRULÁK, ref. 25, p. 4
28 Ibid
29 BLOOMFIELD, ref. 13, p. 452
30 Ibid
to a subculture that runs like a parallel thread throughout the subsequent history. Still, it took several decades for the United States to arrive at a dominant strategic outlook. Ultimately, during the Civil War both sides ended up practicing what eventually came to be known as a ‘strategy of annihilation’. This approach presaged the concept of total warfare, including attacks against civilians, as the ‘march to the sea’ and ‘burning of Atlanta’ brutally demonstrated. The war also highlighted the industrial element in American warfare and established a penchant for unconditional surrender which became its additional trademark.

One other crucial element characterized the strategy of annihilation: a conscious and determined rejection of the Clausewitzian notion that war is an instrument of politics. U.S. politicians and generals concluded that, as general Sherman commented, “war is hell” and it “cannot be refined.” This led to a remarkable situation that once a war started, its conduct was largely delegated to the generals, in accordance with the view of strategy as “the art of bringing forces to the battlefield in a favourable position,” a definition notable for its absence of a political element. Moreover, American elites believed in a uniquely good nature of the United States, which inevitably put its enemies into a moral low ground which justified the use of massive violence (“war is hell”) in order to end the undesired situation (“war is failure”).

The ‘absolutist’ stream in U.S. strategic thinking found its profound manifestation in the doctrine of massive retaliation - and then badly stumbled during general Westmoreland’s campaign in Vietnam. After Vietnam, the combined imperatives of “no more Munich” and “no more Vietnam” produced “a search for painless victory.” The result was the ‘overwhelming force’ approach of the Weinberger-Powell doctrine that dictated strict conditions for committing U.S. forces to action in the first place, coupled with the requirement for significant preponderance over the enemy. The lessons from Vietnam were thus reduced to “only fight when (you know) you can win”. This included more emphasis on technologies as an ultimate answer to war’s challenges. The ‘revolution in military affairs’ (RMA) from 1980s onwards exemplified American optimism by insisting on refuting the “war is hell” predicament.

This ultimately led to the concept of ‘immaculate destruction’. Unlike its predecessor, it wished to achieve superiority over the enemy through precision and accuracy, network-centric warfare and information dominance, dreaming of ‘predictive battlespace awareness’ which makes possible a “microscopic, all-encompassing understanding of the battlespace in all four dimensions, the ability to anticipate the right move rather than simply react to enemy moves.” George W. Bush’s defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld had long been supportive of these strategic visions, but only

32 Ibid, pp. 29, 36
34 Ibid, pp. 18, 20
35 WEIGLEY, ref. 31, p. xviii
37 BULEY, ref. 33, pp. 66-67
38 Ibid, p. 87
after 9/11 he became able to start putting them in practice. The discourse offered a novel idea of ‘mastering the grammar of war’. The new approach aimed at proving Clausewitz wrong by ‘eliminating’ his notions of ‘fog of war’ (i.e. the inevitable lack of available information) and ‘friction’ (unpredictability of the situation). The goal was to digitalize the battlefield to such an extent that warfare could be re-conceptualized as a technical process under total control.39

These visions contained yet another promise - that of ‘humane warfare’.40 This idea took on general Sherman’s claim that “war is cruelty and you cannot refine it”. This, paradoxically, brought Clausewitz back into vogue, since the use of armed force that results in limited casualties becomes a significantly more attractive political tool.41

Buley sees a rift between proponents of ‘overwhelming force’ (such as the Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki who opposed ‘light footprint’ plans for invading Iraq42) and Rumsfeldian hawks behind ‘immaculate destruction’. However, according to him, both approaches profoundly misunderstand Clausewitz, the former by denying the political utility and meaning of using force, the latter by hugely overestimating the ability of technologies to overcome friction and the fog of war. Still, Buley’s conclusion is problematic. While it is undeniable that the strategies of ‘annihilation’ and ‘immaculate destruction’ differ in their understanding of political feasibility of using force, they seem to be in accord with the culturally embedded optimism concerning the role of technologies in warfare. What truly changed was the capacity of the technologies, not strategic goals. Technological advances may make the use of force more ‘political’ in the sense of drawing this policy option within closer reach of the political elite, but the conduct of war remains a ‘technological’ process under the command of generals.

However, there has always been a doppelgänger to the mainstream U.S. strategic culture. Various authors identify ‘the other’ conflicts - the ‘small wars’ - where an alternative approach got utilized: the Spanish War of 1898, the Philippine War of 1900-1904, the ‘limited war’ theorists in 1950s, the proponents of the doctrine of flexible response, the promoters of special forces in 1960s and the effort to employ them in the originally conceived unconventional manner during the latter stages of the Vietnam conflict.43 Still, at the doctrinal level these events were a series of dead ends. Robert Cassidy documents with great insight the resistance of the top echelons of the U.S. armed forces to ‘limited wars’ and ‘military operations other than war’. The process already started in 19th century, based on the formative experience of the Civil War. This is paradoxical, since U.S. Army was a key player in the longest American counterinsurgency campaign, the effort to subjugate the domestic tribes of North American Indians. The history of confrontation with Indians is littered with examples of

40 BULEY, ref. 33, pp. 87-89
41 Ibid, p. 89
warfare incorporating measures typical for counterinsurgency - during a period when the U.S. Army tried to establish professional armed forces modelled rigidly on their European counterparts. A typical pattern was established: The armed forces were engaged in a highly unconventional type of operations, some of its commanders developing highly effective and innovative ways of dealing with the challenge, but the organization refused to draw doctrinal lessons from these engagements. As Cassidy puts it, “the most significant limitations on America’s capacity to conduct small wars stemmed from the resistance of the U.S. military to the very idea of participating in such conflicts.”

Apparently, unconventional military operations go against the established core of U.S. strategic culture. They typically deny the U.S. the opportunity to capitalize on its technological superiority, a lesson learned especially hard during the Vietnam War. Counterinsurgency and other types of unconventional warfare also require a much closer link to political goals - a feature that contravenes the emphasis on the autonomy of armed forces in combat. They also challenge the moral high ground that the U.S. hopes to assume. Moreover, counterinsurgency or stability operations typically do not feature a swift and decisive victory. Finally, the idea of unconditional surrender, so dear to U.S. generals and policy-makers, acquires an almost absurd flair in the context of confronting an asymmetric opponent. All the aforementioned arguments make clear how limited role the ‘small wars’ played in U.S. strategic thinking.

STUDYING THE RISE OF COUNTERINSURGENCY AS A SHIFT IN THE U.S. STRATEGIC CULTURE

It is fairly easy to refute counterinsurgency as a minor military issue, one that has hardly any relevance outside the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, definitely not worth ‘packaging’ as an issue to study in relation to strategic culture (as opposed to and distinct from military culture). And yet, the top echelons of U.S. administration ended up discussing at great length and in agonizing detail this, admittedly, marginal approach to warfare when confronted with seemingly insurmountable challenges at key moments in two defining military conflicts of the new millennium. This suggestion in itself does not make counterinsurgency any more relevant for U.S. armed forces, nor does it suggest its implementation was necessarily a wise move that satisfied the initial expectations. Still, it would be difficult to find a more appropriate empirical demonstration of Bloomfield’s hint that “there may be extraordinary circumstances which ‘force’ decision-makers to rummage around in the cultural toolbox for a solution that better ‘fits’ the unexpected problem at hand” than the ‘turn to counterinsurgency’ by U.S. decision-makers in relation to Iraq in 2006-2007 and in Afghanistan in 2009-2010.

When assessing the role and meaning of counterinsurgency (or COIN) in U.S. strategic culture, we face a risk of falling into a trap of mixing counterinsurgency (or COIN) as a military (operational) doctrine, and ‘counterinsurgency’ as a broader mindset,
representing the community of ‘small wars’ proponents in general. It is the latter which is the primary research interest of this article - while the former inevitably provides its conceptual core. The position of authors like David Kilcullen, John Nagl or David Ucko is not necessarily critical of the dominant strategic culture in the sense of its handling of ‘standard’ (i.e. conventional) military challenges. Rather, it is based on a conviction that once faced with an unconventional enemy (be it Al Qaeda’s terrorists or armed insurgents), the dominant culture simply fails to deliver. From a normative perspective it is still possible to argue that the U.S. should primarily not get in situations like the Iraqi ‘quagmire’ (and, as noted above, this has been one of the primary strategic tenets since the defeat in Vietnam), but this simply cannot negate the empirical reality that the U.S. has just recently ended up in two major conflicts of this kind.

This article does not claim that counterinsurgency was anyhow poised to replace the dominant strategic culture. It merely uses it as a valid recent example of a ‘rising’ subculture in Bloomsfield’s understanding, an ‘instrument’ from an ideational ‘toolbox’ whose utility was highlighted by the aftermath of the post-9/11 developments in U.S. strategic practice. To what extent it did succeed vis-à-vis the dominant culture is a matter of the following empirical survey of the culture’s four dimensions. In the Cold War system dominated by great-power competition, large-scale conventional warfare and especially nuclear weapons, it was inevitably pushed aside. The post-Cold War decline in interstate warfare, rise of intrastate conflicts, emergence of peaceful relations between major powers and the West’s exposure to peace and stabilization operations, however, signalled the growing importance of ‘small wars’. Still, doctrinal acceptance of this paradigmatic shift was low, and assertions of the preference of conventional approaches were common. Condoleezza Rice’s famous quip - “We don’t need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten.” illustrates the point vividly. The proponents of ‘immaculate destruction’ may have paid greater attention to special operations, accepted the importance of dealing with asymmetric opponents and took steps towards overcoming the gap between political decision-making and the conduct of military operations. Still, they enhanced rather than questioned the overall focus on achieving quick, decisive victory through technological superiority. Moreover, as Kilcullen points out, terrorism and insurgency were considered mutually distinct phenomena. The ‘war on terror’ shifted the paradigm about the use of force by the United States, but not in counterinsurgency’s way. ‘Surgical strikes’, ‘lean forces’, ‘network-centric warfare’ (NCW) and ‘effects-based operations’ (EBO) became the buzzwords of the day - all contrary to what counterinsurgency typically entails.

48 BULEY, ref. 33, p. 114
Only after the U.S. forces got bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan did counterinsurgency’s proponents began their ‘surge’. The subculture produced its agents who seized the opportunity to make their imprint on the strategic discourse. With its emphasis on ‘population-centric warfare’, limited utility of technological superiority, restrictive approach to the use of force, primacy of ‘local solutions’, ‘bottom-up adaptation’ and, last but not least, the understanding of military campaigns as a tool in political bargaining, counterinsurgency (as an operational doctrine) as well as ‘counterinsurgency’ as a representative of the small wars ‘mindset’ presented a marked deviation from the established strategic culture. The four-layer, three-stage analytical framework presented above (table 1) should provide a reliable guide to the processes which brought the COINistas to the forefront, and help us understand whether and to what extent they succeeded in their effort.

**Discourse**

In his intentionally paradoxically titled book *The Insurgents*, Fred Kaplan provides a meticulous account of how people like David Petraeus, John Nagl, David Kilcullen, Eliot Cohen or Kalev Sepp gradually developed their interest in counterinsurgency.\(^{51}\) They shared a profound belief in the importance of understanding the broader social context, thus distancing themselves from the typical ‘kinetic’ approach to war. Kaplan points to the importance of the Department of Social Science at West Point as an incubator of people who ended up promoting an alternative approach to warfare.\(^{52}\) What ultimately made them effective and successful was their ability to establish working networks, which included bilateral ties as well as collective endeavours, such as the annual workshops organized in the Basin Harbor Club by Eliot Cohen.\(^{53}\) This observation also establishes a clear empirical link between counterinsurgency as a military doctrine and ‘counterinsurgency’ as a broader approach to the use of force. Put simply, by hobnobbing with people from the top echelons on policy-making, the COINistas managed to engage their counterparts in a debate on strategic merits of their preferred approach.

So did the COINistas want to “change the American way of war”, as Kaplan suggest in the subtitle of his seminal publication? On the one hand, counterinsurgency contravenes all the key features of the American strategic culture. It is ultimately human-centric and sceptical of technologically driven solutions. ‘Human’ approach determines many important aspects of counterinsurgency, from intelligence gathering (primarily through informants among the population) to the actual use of force (preferably by infantrymen making determined effort not to antagonize the locals).\(^{54}\) Counterinsurgency is also acutely aware of the link between military means and political outcomes - the understanding of counterinsurgency as a primarily political contest being the main message conveyed to his followers by one of the founding gurus of counterinsurgency

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\(^{52}\) Ibid, pp. 4-10

\(^{53}\) Ibid, p. 108

\(^{54}\) BULEY, ref. 33, pp. 131-132
theory, David Galula. One of the key imperatives of the COINistas was to avoid the mistake of general Westmoreland in Vietnam who did not realize that the string of gleefully declared ‘tactical victories’ led to a strategic failure. Thirdly, the adherents of counterinsurgency eschewed the cherished dogma of a swift, decisive victory. They openly presented the new strategic approach as a lengthy, gruelling campaign with uncertain results. Taken together, the discourse of counterinsurgency presented a radical challenge to the established way of U.S. strategic thinking indeed.

It is unclear, though, whether a displacement of the status quo was ever a goal of the COINistas. They responded to a specific military crisis by advocating an alternative approach to handling it, based on the ‘excluded’ part of U.S. military history, not necessarily with the aim of transforming the U.S. ‘way of war’ as such. David Kilcullen’s take on the reconceptualization of the ‘global war on terror’ into a ‘global counterinsurgency’ was by far the most ambitious. His concept elevated counterinsurgency from a strategy to counter specific non-state actors to a prescription for dealing with the global security system’s major flaw, i.e. the existence and activities of the global terrorist network. Of all colleagues, probably only Kilcullen was aiming at turning counterinsurgency into a main U.S. approach to the use of force in the ‘war on terror’.

In sum, while the COINistas succeeded in pushing their concept into the mainstream, hence reaching the level of acceptance according to the analytical matrix, they did not (and, arguably, could not) come to dominate the discourse - if perhaps getting close to that goal in the limited context of the ‘global war on terror’ in a given time and conflict scenario. Counterinsurgency’s key characteristics (human-centric approach, political acumen and long-term perspective) ran counter the defining and deeply embedded characteristics of U.S. strategic culture. It is, however, possible to look for certain specific elements instigated by the COINistas which continue to resonate in U.S. defence community, such as the idea of the army as a ‘learning organization’.

Institutions

A simple fact is that the (arguably short-lived) ‘rise of counterinsurgency’ failed to produce any tangible institutional modifications. No counterinsurgency equivalent of the U.S. Army Peacekeeping Institute (1993-2003) was established, though the refashioning thereof as a Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI) since 2003 hints at the continuing (and perhaps rising) relevance of ‘small wars’. The fact that, despite its propagated success in Iraq, counterinsurgency (in both aforementioned senses) failed to take a deeper institutional hold testifies to the challenges faced by its proponents. However, institutional impact is not solely (and maybe not even primarily) measured by ‘institutionalization’ in the sense of founding new organizations, but equally

56 PORCH, ref. 42, p. 223
57 See KILCULLEN, ref. 49, pp. 165-227
important is the ability of relevant ‘agents’ to establish and extend a hold on existing bodies. In this regard, the track-record of the COINistas has been more promising - if still fraught with risks.

Still, as noted above, the understanding of a shift in strategic culture in the context of the agency-structure relationship warrants a peek into efforts of using existing institutions by ‘agents’ of COIN to spread their ‘message’ and solidify their positions. However dull the list of positions held by gen. David Petraeus sounds, it is a testament to an opportunity which opened to the COINistas. The point is not to contribute to Petraeus’s - now seriously shattered - hagiography, but to document a move whereby determined ‘agents of change’ execute what amounts to a ‘hostile takeover’ of institutions which previously functioned as bastions of the dominant strategic culture. Thus Petraeus’s command at the Combined Arms Center in Fort Leavenworth made him the deputy head of the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command, thus controlling its combat school, the National Training Center, the Joint Readiness Training Center, the Battle Command Training Programme, and the Center for Army Lessons Learned. From this position he could influence the army doctrine and preparation for combat, which he fully utilized, most significantly to secure the adoption of the counterinsurgency manual described below.

Petraeus’s promotion to the commanding officer of the Multinational Force - Iraq in January 2007, despite scepticism among much of the remaining army’s leadership, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, marks the most important moment in incorporating counterinsurgency into the official U.S. strategy. This post brought Petraeus wider critical acclaim than his next command of CENTCOM which made him responsible for the conduct of U.S. military operations over the whole Middle East, including Afghanistan. His subsequent voluntary demotion to the commander of the U.S. and ISAF forces in Afghanistan after the repeal of general McStanley led to the ultimately unsuccessful effort to replicate the counterinsurgency ‘matrix’ there. Once again, the point is not to write Petraeus’s ‘travelogue’ through the ranks of U.S. armed forces but to document the interplay between the established institutions of the dominant strategic culture and a determined ‘agent of change’, promoting ideas and concepts of a hitherto suppressed strategic subculture. Accordingly, while his position at the top of MNF-I marked the apex of counterinsurgency promotion and acceptance, the failure to repeat the relative success in Afghanistan signalled its decline, culminating with Petraeus’s retirement from the armed forces in August 2011. Since Petraeus and his views represented a vocal, but nevertheless minority position in the leadership of the armed forces, his decline also meant a serious blow to possible institutionalization of counterinsurgency. While the ascendant phase of Petraeus’s COIN-related career coincides with the institutional acceptance of the concept, his descent and eventual downfall only underlined the precarious position which counterinsurgency held as part of the U.S. strategic ‘toolbox’.

59 Kaplan, ref. 51, pp. 130-131
60 Ibid., pp. 319-348
61 Porch, ref. 42, pp. 312-313
Doctrine

At the doctrinal level, it makes sense to differentiate between two levels on which the counterinsurgency proponents made an impact. At the level of military doctrine, they achieved a lasting success with the adoption of the counterinsurgency manual FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 for the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps in December 2006. The manual is significant not only due to its mere existence but also thanks to the unique process of its preparation, opened not only to military personnel but also to invited civilian experts - underlining (and, in an apparent PR move, selling to wider public) the distinct features of the doctrine. Moreover, the field manual concerns the army and the marines as a whole, ensuring the spread of at least some of the ideas cherished by the COINlistas across the two branches of U.S. military. The document represents a lasting formalization of the previously suppressed strategic sub-culture, and thus a major achievement of its proponents.63

Furthermore, the counterinsurgency field manual was followed by a crop of related military documents which further enhanced its major themes: In August 2007, the Army Action Plan for Stability Operations was published, comprising developmental, humanitarian and governance-related tasks. The same month, the U.S. Air Force adopted its Doctrine Document 2-3 Irregular Warfare to fill in a gap in USAF guidelines; while emphasizing specific USAF capabilities, it largely conformed to the army and marine document. On 11 September 2007, the Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept (IWJOC) was published and replaced the vague definition of irregular warfare in QDR 2006 with a concept in line with population-centric warfare. Most importantly, it gave legitimacy to all major irregular missions, including counterinsurgency and stability operations. U.S. Army also incorporated major ideas from the counterinsurgency manual into its general Army Field Manual 3-0 Operations from February 2008. While its previous version from 2001 devoted two specialized, separate chapters to stability operations and support operations, the 2008 manual emphasized the need to consider stabilization and reconstruction as pertaining to all operations by the branch.64

However, did these developments, relevant in themselves for a far more limited military culture, amount to a shift at the strategic (national) level? A new focus in assessing the international security environment was announced soon after the 9/11 attacks in the National Security Strategy 2002,65 with a bold declaration of a new overall ‘doctrine’ of pre-emptive strikes against terrorists and related targets. While the


63 The Counterinsurgency Field Manual resonates as a major achievement (though not necessarily positively appreciated) in the studies of U.S. counterinsurgency mentioned above, see e.g. KAPLAN, ref. 51, pp. 213-222; PORCH, ref. 42, pp. 300-303, 312-313; UCKO, ref. 47, pp. 103-119.

64 UCKO, ref. 45, pp. 132-134

strategy represented a step away from previous approaches, it did not necessarily steer the U.S. strategic culture from its technology-centric, apolitical, decisive-victory ideal. For assessing the importance of counterinsurgency within the context of the United States’ overall defence doctrine, a simple content analysis of the Quadrennial Defence Reviews (QDR) provides some interesting insight: In QDR 2006, “counterinsurgency” is mentioned 8 times (while “deterrence” - to note a paragon of state-to-state warfare - receives 23 mentions), and the document makes a strong emphasis on the ‘new’ kind of warfare, with the word “irregular” appearing 41 times, “asymmetric” 14 times and “unconventional” 12 times. In QDR 2010, the interest in counterinsurgency seems to peak with 24 references to the term (as compared e.g. to 19 to deterrence), while, interestingly, the words “irregular” (1 mention), “asymmetric” (2 references) and “unconventional” (2 mentions) clearly in retreat. However, QDR 2014 provides a radical reorientation with only 3 references to “counterinsurgency” (in contrast to 14 mentions of “deterrence”) and zero mentions of “irregular” and “unconventional”, while the term “asymmetric” is mentioned 7 times.

It is clear that QDR 2006 reflected the post-9/11 strategic shock which it translated into the perceived ‘irregularity’ of the situation. As David Ucko noted, however, only few provisions concerned directly counterinsurgency and, furthermore, the document assumed that regular forces will play little role in counterinsurgency and the task will be solely executed by special units. Taking into account the fact that special operations forces tend to specialize more in direct action than counterinsurgency, the document provided only a partial opening for the doctrine’s rise. The high point for counterinsurgency arrived with QDR 2010 that, under the impression of the developments in Iraq and the debate about future action in Afghanistan, solidified the doctrine’s position in the U.S. strategy. Moreover, virtual disappearance of the references to irregular, asymmetric and unconventional signals that counterinsurgency came to be regarded as part of the ‘new normal’. This conclusion, however, got heavily undermined by QDR 2014 which represents a stepback for the doctrine. The continuing emphasis on terrorist and other non-state threats is signalled through the increased usage of the term “asymmetric”, but counterinsurgency no longer seems to represent a significant part of the U.S. response (as opposed to “counterterrorism” which is mentioned 14 times in the document).

Counterinsurgency clearly ‘surged’ between 2006 and 2010 - a period corresponding with the rise of general Petraeus and his clique - but fell in importance after the failure to replicate its success in Afghanistan. Evidently, the doctrine got accepted at the...

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69 UCKO, ref. 42, pp. 81-102
military level but never came to dominate the strategic outlook, not even within the more limited scope of countering unconventional, non-state threats.

Operations

U.S. counterinsurgency operations after 9/11 can be summed up in two words - Iraq and Afghanistan. After it became clear that the declaration of victory by president Bush on 1 May 2003 was tragically premature, several of the units deployed to Iraq to handle the aftermath of the invasion attempted partial or wholesale counterinsurgency solutions when confronted by hostile activity. This included Petraeus’s 101st Airborne Division in Mosul, but also British units in Basra, colonel McMaster’s activities in Tal Afar or 1st Marine Division’s revival of the Vietnam-era Combined Action Program. These efforts, however, were scattered and lacked a broader strategic framework. Only after the idea of a ‘surge’ got political support from top political leadership was the field open for a more rigorous application of the counterinsurgency doctrine in a coordinated fashioned controlled by the command of MNF-I. The first large-scale counterinsurgency operation of the U.S. armed forces since Vietnam was launched under the codename Faardh al-Qanoon on 13 February 2007, essentially putting the newly adopted counterinsurgency manual in practice. The fact that the U.S. military launched an operation of this nature in a crucial battlefield demonstrated the level of acceptance the doctrine has reached. While not completely convincing in its impact on the overall developments in Iraq, operation Faardh al-Qanoon clearly provided the COINistas considerable political leverage. Three years later, this led to a mirror attempt at using the doctrine’s promise in Afghanistan, starting with president Obama’s decision to increase the number of soldiers there at the beginning of December 2009.

Both Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated that senior U.S. political and military leadership was ready to turn to the ‘toolbox’ of counterinsurgency as a reservoir of ideas for dealing with an apparent stand-off against asymmetrical armed opponents. The relative success of the campaign in Iraq was later undermined by political developments, and in Afghanistan the counterinsurgency operations badly stalled. Still, this hardly represents an utter and unmitigated failure. The COINistas largely made their point that certain aspects of the dominant U.S. military and strategic culture are harmful when dealing with insurgencies - a lesson that is likely to be remembered and further reflected upon. At the same time, under a clear doctrinal guidance, American forces turned out quite adapt at materializing counterinsurgency doctrine’s requirements. The notion of the U.S. military as ‘learning organization’, sensitive to local specifics, may have taken hold.

Thus, the failure to replicate comparatively promising results from Iraq in Afghanistan does not necessarily signify that counterinsurgency has fallen completely out of favour in U.S. strategic thinking. It is true that its potential promise, visible in Iraq throughout 2007, has so far not been replicated. Under president Obama who - after attempting his own ‘surge’ in Afghanistan - clearly eschewed large-scale deployments of U.S. troops in

70 BULEY, ref. 32, p. 121
71 BULEY, ref. 33, p. 130-132; KAPLAN, ref. 51, pp. 244-269; UCKO, ref. 42, pp. 162-166
73 KAPLAN, ref. 51, pp. 294-318
land operations, counterinsurgency has not been given such a chance again. But the situation is a far cry from the post-Vietnam developments when irregular warfare and, to a large extent, the U.S. military as a whole were thoroughly discredited in the eyes of the American public. The campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq were clearly not successful in achieving many of their stated goals, but the application of counterinsurgency in itself was far from a disaster. As a tool, and as a strategic choice for engaging a challenging security situation, it has been thoroughly tested and apart from the apparent cost (of which even its proponents warned), it gained a certain footing in U.S. strategic thinking. Whether and how soon it will be utilized again will clearly depend on future international and internal American developments.

CONCLUSION: ASSESSING THE ANALYTICAL PROMISE OF CONCEPTUALIZING SHIFTS IN STRATEGIC CULTURE

Strategic cultures typically change slowly, but not always. Sometimes, events of great impact put into motion external pressures which result in ‘shifts’ that leave the strategic culture significantly transformed. Such was the case with the 9/11 terrorist attacks that started a series of processes which led the United States to Iraq, where growing dissatisfaction with the development of the military campaign eventually opened a window of opportunity for the proponents of counterinsurgency. These ‘agents of change’ amounted to a major internal factor that kept pressing the issue and its relevance. This article tried to demonstrate the virtue and promise of formulating a dedicated analytical framework for assessing such changes. While limited and by necessity selective, the empirical application demonstrated the viability of the concept - and, thus, of the conceptualization of change in strategic culture as such.

However, closer look at the development of the U.S. security and defence since 9/11 also demonstrated how deeply entrenched the basic tenets of its dominant strategic culture are. The proponents of ‘immaculate destruction’, regarded by some as harbingers of a major strategic rethink, ended up reaffirming significant features of the American way of war - the reliance on technology and search for a painless, decisive victory. Proponents of counterinsurgency, while using a wave of political support generated by the quagmire in Iraq, only slightly altered the pre-existing strategic preferences. They have, though, at least added an important layer to the dominant stream of thinking and practice; a layer which may prove harder to eradicate than notions of irregular warfare after the war in Vietnam.

By employing the notion of strategic culture as a ‘cluster’ of dominant and marginalized approaches, the applied analytical matrix provides a useful insight into the chances the change might have. Counterinsurgency, despite the controversy it provoked during its rise, seems to have left a mark on U.S. strategic thinking, and though largely ignored at the moment, has established enough mechanisms which can be activated the next time U.S. decision-makers will feel the need to reach for a new ‘instrument’ from the strategic ‘toolbox’. Compared to the situation before 2006, a similar shift in the future should be easier, resting on at least some achievements at the levels of discourse, institutions, doctrine and operations.