Cultural Topography: A New Research Tool for Intelligence Analysis

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In the third edition of his "History of the World," J.M. Roberts notes that "Historical inertia is easily underrated…the historical forces molding the outlook of Americans, Russians, and Chinese for centuries before the words capitalism and communism were invented are easy still to overlook."[1] In this article, Jeannie Johnson and I offer a variation on Roberts's view: Cultural inertia is easily underrated, and American decisionmakers have shown a need for help in isolating and understanding the complexity, weight, and relevance of culture as they consider foreign policy initiatives.

The view I bring to this discussion is not one of an anthropologist but rather one of a former economic analyst in US intelligence who has been a senior manager of analysts in various disciplines for a decade. My analytic and management positions have repeatedly brought me into indirect and sometimes direct interaction with top-level US decisionmakers including several US presidents. As I witnessed these decisionmakers in action and tried to help deliver insights they needed, I came to conclude that the "inertia of culture" was often underrated in their assessments of opportunities and obstacles, in part because few if any of their information sources offered a systematic and persuasive methodology for addressing this inertia and its implications for their policy options. I also came to conclude from direct observation and some readings out of the academic field of strategic culture that America's cultural view features the notion that Americans can achieve anything anywhere including going to the moon—if they just invest enough resources.

This notion is understandable but perhaps hazardous. America's remarkable history of achievement includes being the first nation actually to go to the moon, but the we-can-do-anything part of American self-identity also leads some to argue still that US failures in

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Vietnam were not the consequence of a poorly managed investment; they were the consequences of investing too little.[2] How many resources and over what period would have been sufficient to strike "success"—particularly if success would have required changes in Vietnam at the cultural level? I have rarely seen American policymakers ask "Will our desired foreign policy outcome require change over there at the cultural level? Over what period and with what resources is such cultural change achievable?"

The more I observed the policy-intelligence dynamic, the more I perceived a need for an analytic construct designed exclusively to illustrate clearly and persuasively the inertia of culture. Cultural influences are typically touched on within US Intelligence Community (IC) analyses as peripheral factors, described with passing references, and often in general and superficial terms. Although the IC is full of world-class expertise on foreign peoples, places, and organizations, this industry rarely isolates and illustrates culture as a factor deserving its own sophisticated and thorough treatment.

To remedy this perceived deficiency, I teamed with Jeannie Johnson—formerly an intelligence analyst at CIA and now with Utah State University—who had brought her academic training in strategic culture to a pursuit similar to mine. For some time she had been amassing training ideas in the area of cultural analysis for IC experts, and our combined efforts, along with significant input from other members of my former office,[3] trial runs of intelligence products, research, and continued refinements over the past four years have resulted in a process we call "Cultural Mapping." This process, or methodology, is designed to isolate and assess cultural factors at play on issues of intelligence interest and to distinguish the degree to which those factors influence decisionmaking and outcomes. Mapping exercises done across time, spanning multiple issues, and on diverse groups within a society may aid in understanding that society's "Cultural Topography." We describe the process below.-mtb

Target Audience: Intelligence Analysts

Understanding this methodology and its specific structure requires a grasp of the users for whom it was designed: intelligence analysts. Anthropologist Rob Johnston was hired in the wake of 9/11 to complete an ethnographic analysis of the IC's analytic cadre and to offer suggestions for improving its performance. He observed biases produced by both ethnocentrism and expertise, which resulted in rather serious cognitive gaps, and he noted a lack of systematic tools for going after cultural data.[4]

Johnston defines ethnocentrism as the tendency to project "one's own cognition and norms onto others." Intuition, a compass regularly employed by career analysts, is culturally encoded and, by nature, ethnocentric. Johnston warns of its use as a barometer for analyzing or predicting the behavior of foreign agents.[5] According to Edward Stewart and Milton Bennett, American cultural tendencies are particularly unhelpful in this regard. Despite vast information resources and exposure to exotic cultures, Americans continue to overemphasize similarity and assume that other social groups have values and aspirations in line with their own.[6]

It may seem counterintuitive to see expertise as a source of bias but Johnston points out that "becoming an expert requires a significant number of years viewing the world through the lens of one specific domain. This concentration gives the expert the power to recognize patterns, perform tasks, and solve problems, but it also focuses the expert's attention on one domain to the exclusion of others."[7]

Johnston's cautionary counsel regarding the habits of experts echoes that penned by Richards Heuer two decades earlier:

> *Once people have started thinking about a problem one way, the same mental circuits or pathways get activated and strengthened each time they think about it. This facilitates the retrieval of informa-*

tion. These same pathways, however, also become the mental ruts that make it difficult to reorganize the information mentally so as to see it from a different perspective.[8]

A third form of observed bias among analysts, which might be added to Johnston's list, has roots in academic training and is an institutional legacy that tends to leave culture out in the "all-source" approach to analysis. The academic backgrounds of most intelligence analysts stem from disciplines that emphasize power and wealth as the primary human motivators, leaving underexplored other motivators such as identity, preservation of social institutions, alternative value structures, powerful narratives, or perceptions of the security environment distinctive to a person's or group's region and history. Due to institutional habits, the educational paradigms of many of our experts, and the reticence of members of the anthropological community to accept positions within US security institutions, culture has received limited attention as a variable. Most analysts have simply not been introduced to the training or the research tools for going after cultural data effectively.

This bias also affects intelligence collection, which aims disproportionately at foreign

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leaders and the elite cadres that surround them. We have, institutionally, very few tools aimed at understanding national populations or specific subcultures, a point General Michael Flynn made in his public rebuke of intelligence practices in Afghanistan in January 2010.[9] The emphasis on elites has produced cognitive gaps in our analysis—perhaps illustrated anew by the surprise over the political tumult that erupted across North Africa and the Middle East in early 2011. Johnston observes:

> *[An] analyst, while accounting successfully for an adversary's capability, may misjudge that adversary's intention, not because of what is cognitively available, but because of what is cognitively absent. The failure to determine an adversary's intention may simply be the result of missing information or, just as likely, it may be the result of missing hypotheses or mental models about an adversary's potential behavior.[10]*

Noting that the lack of cultural data in mental models is a problem not only for analysts but also for the policymakers they support, Johnston exhorts:

> *Specific cultural knowledge is a skill and the foundation for forecasting the behavior and decisionmaking of foreign actors. Acquiring cultural knowledge should be taken as seriously as learning any other facet of one's analytic capabilities. Moreover, it is incumbent on analysts to educate their own leadership and policymakers about the value and utility of cultural knowledge for intelligence analysis.[11]*

Johnston's advice may sound rather obvious, but given the scope and complexity of the phenomenon we call "culture," attempting its research and determining—with no prior training in this field—which aspects have policy relevance can be an intimidating task even for the most talented political, economic, or military analyst. Interviews with analysts have often revealed a sense of being overwhelmed by the scope of cultural data that are relevant to their accounts—and of dismay at the length and depth of the historical knowledge necessary to capture a grand strategic profile of any region or group. One reaction is to subconsciously search for reasons why cultural data are not necessary—a position that ana-

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lysts schooled in the international relations paradigms of realism and neorealism are already trained to take.

Analysts also face institutional obstacles to in-depth cultural study. The organizations they work for are required to produce large volumes of often tactical pieces on a daily basis. For some analytic assignments, this pace can be relentless. IC institutions simply do not have the manpower to pursue the type of cultural research employed by professional anthropologists: living in the region for extended periods in order to conduct ethnography (participant observation) and to refine fluency in the local language. Many analysts move from one account to another during their careers and must conduct cultural research via short-term stays in theater, brief stints of language training, and information that can be accessed from their desk or in library holdings.

Given this particular organizational backdrop, our aims have been modest but effective, we hope, in moving cultural

research and analysis forward within the community. Our research tool is designed to broaden the IC's grasp of the factors that drive outcomes, specifically cultural factors, and to help IC analysts be creative in their collection of cultural data. We make no attempt to deliver the end point or last word in cultural research. What we offer is an accessible research tool that can produce systematic, sophisticated surveys of cultural variables, a grasp of which can greatly help US policymakers achieve desired outcomes and avoid surprises.

Research Philosophy

Our experience in marrying cultural data and analysis to the daily demands of defense and intelligence analysis has led to a few conclusions about best practice. The most overriding of these is that sweeping cultural profiles of a region or a national group are of limited value in the intelligence industry for a number of reasons. As has been effectively argued by Christopher Twomey, security studies that attempt to draw predictive power from the

amorphous and often internally contradictory substance we call "national culture" often suffer follies of overgeneralization and static analysis, and they reach, as a consequence, questionable conclusions about the sources of security policy.[12] Patrick Porter heaps heavy criticism on many of the West's nascent efforts at cultural analysis for making this mistake. He accuses military and intelligence analysts of drawing static portraits of Eastern cultures rather than recognizing them as moving, flexing, human creations—and, in so doing, introducing dangerous sources of error.[a][13]

To reference "culture" in the singular for any particular polity is typically an error; there is rarely just one internal variety. Walter Russell Mead identifies four distinct narratives within US strategic culture and posits that our various foreign policies are formed from the "collisions and debates" those narratives inspire.[14] The idea of composite cultures is not restricted to analysis of the US, of course. Authors writing on Germany, China, India, and Iran, to name a few, all note the internal conflict of competing cultural narratives about national security within these countries.[15] The existence of

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[a] Porter's warnings are valid but may be a bit overstated. Today's Department of Defense is not entirely uninitiated in doctrines of cultural change. Leading-edge training methods emphasize "practice theory"—an approach to culture which treats the change dynamic as central. Practice theory explains culture as a product of interaction between agent and structure and trains analysts to expect change rather than stasis.

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multiple cultures is present not only at the national level; it is true right down to the ordinary individual. As Kevin Avruch quips, "for any individual, culture always comes in the plural."[16] The cultural influences at play on a single actor could derive from a background that features Northern European, Catholic, engineering school, and family-specific influences.

Most academic work examining the impact of culture on security policy mirrors the biases of the IC by privileging elite-level culture (usually at the organizational level) over other types. The typical justification of this approach is that while public opinion may play a peripheral role, "it is arguably the elite—owing to its role as gatekeeper, its expert knowledge and its privileged access to means of communication—that ultimately decides which way security policy goes."[17] But this logic breaks down when one is assessing the impact of culture within the context of counterinsurgency and stability operations, for instance. Given the pivotal role of local popular opinion in this type of military engagement, understanding public culture, the cultures of significant substate groups, and how these affect security policy becomes paramount.

The research method presented here asks analysts to step outside the biases of the

institutional and academic work already done on their topic and assess afresh which actors and cultural influences are most relevant for the policy issue they are researching. In some cases this may be a vastly understudied section of the population, one which has received little attention within official channels, and one whose research will require unorthodox (for the institution) survey and collection methods.

Culture at any level—organizational, tribal, ethnic, regional, or national—is a dynamic human creation and subject to change, but this should not discourage analysts from its study. Any tool devised to track cultural influences must employ questions that challenge previous assumptions, unearth fresh data, and highlight possible areas of change, but as Barak A. Salmoni and Paula Holmes-Eber remind Marines who may be intimidated by the complexity and movement of the cultures they are studying:

> *Although people are, by nature, variable and unpredictable, they still need to work with others in social and cultural groups. These groups —and their associated beliefs and structures—are organized according to logical, understandable principles that every person living in the culture must understand, at least intuitively, in order to get along with each other. With some basic study,* [others] *can also recognize and understand these principles and apply that understanding to their operations.*[18]

It is with our specific audience and these basic assumptions about culture in mind that we constructed the Cultural Mapping method. It is presented here in the step-by-step process we have provided recently to groups of analysts.

Cultural Mapping Exercise

Step 1: Identify an Issue of Intelligence Interest

The first injunction to analysts is to narrow the scope of cultural inquiry by isolating a particular policy question of interest. The narrower the issue, the more targeted the cultural research, and the more likely it will yield actionable data. The issue selected may reflect a frequently asked question that needs examining from a new angle, or a question that policymakers are not asking—perhaps due to ethnocentric blinders, habit, or limited

knowledge of the region—but should be.

Step 2: Select an Actor

Analysts are urged in the this step to isolate a particular population for study. All "players" within this issue arena are identified for consideration, stretching to include some not typically examined. A sampling of possible actors might include prosperous urban elites, an ethnic subgroup, a particular government institution, a dissident group, a village council, housewives across a region, a youth bulge, or the cadre around a leadership figure. From among these subgroups, or actors, one is selected for focused study. This actor may be the one expected to play the most pivotal role in a particular outcome on the issue selected or one that is dangerously understudied and may present a wild card for the future.

The actor in question need not have a discernible "group culture." The important question here is not "what is this actor's culture?" but rather "what cultural influences will weigh in on decisionmaking on this issue for members of this group?"

The mapping exercise is designed as a looping process. The actor who seems most relevant initially may fade into the background as research progresses and the salience of other actors becomes apparent. Conversely, the initial actor may remain of interest but emerge as a far more complex entity once research magnifies

group properties. Analysts are invited to loop back to this stage after an initial round of research in order to disaggregate, refine, or switch actor sets in a way most profitable for intelligence analysis.

Continued refinement occurs to the central policy question as well. Analysts may find that they were as captive to ethnocentric blinders as the clients they serve when crafting the initial intelligence question. Looped-back refinements on this front are to be expected.

Step 3: Amass a Range of Cultural Influences

Assuming Avruch's logic that all individuals and groups possess culture in the plural, analysts are asked to map out the various cultural influences which may guide the behavior of members of this group—again, *within the context of the issue they are assessing*. These influences range from the local, such as clan, tribal, or organizational cultures, to wider cultural influences, such as regional, ethnic, religious, national, gendered, socioeconomic, or generational. Analysts need not confine themselves to fleshing out "typical" cultural influence sets but rather think expansively and creatively about the specific group they are studying.

New forms of social media have norms embedded and learned by new users; a leadership cadre hailing from a similar educational institution may espouse a common view of how

the world works; and foreign youth who work part time at America's franchises may be internalizing a strong dose of capitalist work ethic. We encourage analysts to consider all plausible influences initially, pursuing this as an exploratory stage. Decisions about which influences are most relevant will come later.

Step 4: Explore the Cultural Data from Four Perspectives

In order to supply structure to the cultural exploration encouraged in Step 3, we suggest the following four categories for assessing cultural data: *Identity*, *Norms*, *Values*, and *Perceptual Lens*. This is not an exhaustive list of important cultural factors but is a useful starting point in examining culture from four policy relevant perspectives. The categories are distinctive enough from one another to inspire different sets of questions and elastic enough to capture a wide range of data:

Identity: The character traits the group assigns to itself, the reputation it pursues, and individual roles and statuses it designates to members.

Norms: Accepted and expected modes of behavior.

Values: Material or ideational goods that are honored or that confer increased status to members.

Perceptual Lens: The filter through which this group determines "facts" about others.

Analysts receive an in-depth list of questions for each category.[a] The magnitude of cultural data unearthed in answering the questions in these four categories may be managed by keeping a litmus test for policy relevance in mind. An initial short list of questions might examine the issue selected in Step 1 in the ways below.

Identity.

• Which factors surrounding this issue would cause this actor's identity to be threatened? Alternatively, which might provide the US common ground for co-option?

• Is group cohesion strong along identity lines in response to this issue? What would cause the group to fracture or to unite behind a common front?

• What individual roles and statuses might group members seek to protect?

Norms.

• Does this issue place social institutions or common practices under threat?

• Which practices are deeply internalized and likely to inspire resistance?

• Which practices are compatible with US interests on this issue?

• Would our proposed changes in this policy area offer group members a way out of increasingly unpopular normative practices? Which members?

Values.

• What is considered "honorable" behavior in this issue area?

• Which local values may be in conflict with our approach to this issue?

• Which values might be co-opted in moving US interests forward?

• Where might value differences between target groups present an opportunity to exploit cleavages?

Perceptual Lens:

• What are the preconceived notions of this group concerning the behavior and character of the United States?

• What are group's beliefs about the future?

• What hurdles must we overcome in messaging to this group on this issue?

This tidy and rather simple list of questions may provide the false impression that the answers are readily apparent and attainable. The reality is that unearthing and isolating factors that might be captured as identity, norms, values, and perceptual lens is a messy business. It involves doing heavy amounts of open-source reading, using the research skills honed in graduate school (rather than the typical day-to-day practices of the intelligence business), and wading through a lot of data of questionable relevance.

Most analysts need to take themselves off-line for a period in order to accomplish this task with any effectiveness. This sort of research does not mix well with the often frenetic pace of producing current intelligence. Some offices have been particularly proactive in this regard and have offered their analysts short sabbaticals in order to get them away from their desks. These intelligence officers remove themselves to a separate location—in most instances to an institution with significant holdings on their area of interest—to conduct research. Other offices have assigned analysts into research or methodology teams where they can focus on a long-term research endeavor with the necessary consistency.

[a] The questions are contained in an appendix available in digital versions of this article.

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After immersing themselves in what cultural data is available through official channels, open-source searches, and (ideally) visits to the region, analysts begin to identify cognitive gaps in previous modes of analysis. In addition to benefitting from new data accumulated on their account, they become far more attuned to what they don't know—what information the institution is not collecting. Identifying key knowledge gaps means coming up with creative solutions for going after the target data. Time constraints limit the ability of intelligence analysts to employ extended ethnography as a tool, and institutional restraints can limit the ability to employ methods pursued by academic or other institutions. The following is a collection of cultural research strategies proffered by a variety of analysts representing the full range of experience, with some residing in academic venues and others in policymaking forums.

Historical Narratives

Nearly all analysts begin with the assumption that one must conduct a thorough background investigation to become familiar with a regime's history, geography, internal social codes, and general interactions with other states. If not conducted with strategic efficiency, this task can be overwhelming.

One way to gauge those aspects of history relevant to the issue being tracked is to pay attention to historic references made when the policy issue is addressed, whether in political rhetoric, private conversation, lessons in school, or expressions from the artistic community. Which narratives do politicians draw on to legitimize their behavior on this issue and to pacify the public? Which narratives work? Which do not?

Physical manifestations such as architecture, street names, statues, and memorials demonstrate which aspects of a nation's history it chooses to preserve and celebrate. Finding and understanding the selection of heroes, for example, lends itself to understanding national values. [19] Of particular interest are those symbols that people voluntarily display in their homes. [20]

Understanding historic narratives can be critical to making sense of the strategic choices of foreign populations. The 1999 bombing campaign against Serbia supplies an example. US analysts vastly underestimated the duration and expense of the 1999 engagement, in part because they undervalued the role of historic narratives of victory and defeat. Serbia's national holiday is not a celebration of a past battlefield victory but of a glorious defeat in 1389 at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. Serbs celebrate the valor of the war's hero, Prince Lazar, who received a heavenly visitation on the eve of battle and was told that unless he surrendered he faced certain defeat the next day. Given the choice, Lazar declared that it was better to die in battle than to live in shame. [21] He did precisely that—and became cemented in Serbian legend.

This tale permeates Serbian society. It is taught to youngsters in school and is represented in homes and offices in the renowned painting "Kosovo Girl." Most analysts working this issue were familiar with these aspects of Serbian culture but lacked a method for tracking and weighing them systematically and thus acquiring the footing necessary to articulate persuasively to policymakers the potential impact on Serbian behavior: that is, that Serbia would find victory by standing up to an overpowering military force when the world expected it to fold.

Understanding the weight of this narrative for Serbs in defining honorable conduct during war would probably have disabused planners of the idea that the bombing campaign would be over quickly. Instead of projecting a three-day campaign, we might have helped policymakers plan for a cam-

Tapping into the Population

Useful interaction with the population under survey can range from rudimentary (daily records of anecdotal interaction) to highly institutionalized methods (sophisticated polling conducted nationwide).[23] One popular method for both institutions and individual researchers is targeted focus groups. Much has been written on this particular survey technique, but the advice of analysts in the field is that effective focus groups must be preceded by an in-depth study of the issue at hand so that the interviewer can select a sampling of *relevant* focus group participants and frame questions appropriately.[24]

One selection device employed by ethnographers is to narrow interviews to "key informants" of local culture.[25] Key informants can range from subject matter experts to those who are cynical about their own culture and are therefore observant, reflective, and articulate.[a][26]

A variation on key informants is "key keepers" of culture. These people are defined by frequent contact and extended conversation with other members of the community. As a result, the key keepers tend to harbor the notions, language modes, and perceptual lens of the local community.[27] A key keeper may be institutional. In determining core values within Israeli society, Greg Giles looked first to shared, institutionalized socialization processes. He pinpointed the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) since universal conscription requires that all Israeli citizens experience socialization and training through this institution. Giles points out that it is not just contact with the institution that matters, but institutional legitimacy. The IDF meets these criteria based on the high number of young people polled who said they would be willing to serve in the IDF even if it were an all-volunteer force.[28]

An important window into norms and the color of a group's perceptive lens is the "conventional wisdom"—the things "everybody knows."[29] Compiling and analyzing oral traditions may take a number of different forms. The author of a recent popular survey of Iran attempted to do this by engaging in dialogue with persons from a sampling of all of the society's castes and factions and starting each conversation with the same request: "Tell me your story."[30] The patterns and themes developed across conversations helped uncover generally accepted notions about self and others. Additional probing may reveal notions of identity—what is taken for granted as a natural role for the nation, what is expected, and what is controversial.[31]

One inventive young scholar from Monterey's Naval Postgraduate School proposed an alternative to official polling—the systematic study of "RUMINT" (rumor intelligence).[32] She surveyed and prioritized the issues on the minds of Iraqis by tracking the frequency of rumors that appeared in local print. One of her findings, a surprise for US forces at the time, was that a large swath of Iraqis believed the United States was *behind* the insurgency. Their belief stemmed not so much from an assumption that the United States was malicious but from the perception that it was impossible that a superpower with the might of America could not stop the insurgency if it wanted to. Therefore, the United States must be behind it. Her work produced a number of timely insights for US

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[a] Bernard claims that cynical informants have consistently been his best sources over the years.

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officials concerning Iraqi attitudes and priorities.

Those not in-theater could use alternative approaches to tracking gossip networks. Dr. Deborah Wheeler, a specialist in Middle East studies, has focused her research on online discussions across her region —particularly among women who otherwise do not speak out. Chat rooms and editorials posted in pseudonymous blogs may be one way to evaluate the thinking of otherwise reticent populations.[33] Christine Fair, an analyst writing on Iran, suggests another alternative to firsthand interviews with citizens of a repressive regime:

> *Utiliz*[e] *consulates of countries where Iranians seek US visas (India and Turkey) to collect and develop information during the visa interview process. Defense attachés may also engage their in-country counterparts in countries where military cooperation with Iran are ongoing to gain insights into Iran.*[34]

Expatriates are a self-selected group, often coming from within a limited segment of society not representative of the broader base. Despite this sampling drawback, interviews with this group offer some value. Students from the region of interest living abroad are often better at identifying beliefs and norms in their home lands than fellow citizens left behind because the students have experienced the contrast between their national beliefs and those of people in their host countries.[35]

Secondhand interviews—interviewing those who frequently interact with members of the culture—are also very useful, especially in cases where the populace does not feel comfortable speaking openly about its thoughts and opinions.[36] In some cases it is politically incorrect to speak of one's historic culture, especially where security policy is concerned, so there is an absence of civil or political rhetoric on the topic. Rodney Jones notes the case of Japan, where Jesuit priests who lived there for extended periods were more likely than Japanese statesmen to speak freely of Japan's history and predilections.[37]

Joe Bermudez, a longtime Korea analyst, notes that when information is hard to come by, as it is with North Korea, even interviews with travelers and a careful look at their photographs can prove beneficial. In North Korea's case, it helps unveil the genuine state of affairs for the state's population (regarding, for example, roads, electricity, phone service, and health conditions) in contrast to state claims about its situation.[38]

Content Analysis of Texts

When evaluating national-level cultural threads, texts taught in school deserve special attention. Classroom textbooks explain perceptions of a nation's own history, its view of others, acceptable methods of warfare, and common justifications for past behavior (norms). Societal values are taught to children explicitly, particularly in the early stages of education. Their texts may include hero legends, songs, rhymes, fables and oversimplified anecdotes from the nation's history.[39] Valuable cultural or political insights can be drawn from noting which figures are celebrated, which are despised, and why.[40] Education and other socialization processes also result in a body of shared literature considered "classic." What are the messages in this body of work? How widely are the classics read? How often are they referenced?[41]

Military texts are essential sources of information on the values, identity, and acceptable methods of achieving security within a regime. Twomey recommends a deep survey of all sorts of doctrinal texts—telegrams, military orders, descriptions of training regimens, diaries, memoirs, and communications between military leaders.[42] This study would

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reveal national aspirations over time (identity), accepted norms for achieving them, and perhaps more particular values such as views on the use of manpower and loss of life.[43]

Tracking Political Rhetoric

The key to analyzing political rhetoric effectively is understanding, in local context, the role it plays in communicating with the population of interest. Russia analyst Fritz Ermarth notes that a first step in weighing the value of political rhetoric within a nation is to track its correlation with actual behavior in the past. Tracking over time and across politicians may yield useful generalizations about government speeches as indicators of sincere goals and security objectives.[44] On China, Twomey points out that the culture tends to weigh private comments more heavily than public statements and that inflammatory public statements need to be qualified accordingly.[45]

Once understood, public rhetoric may represent a rich data field for assessing norm strength or identity trends. The work of Andrew Cortell and James Davis, as well as that of Paul Kowert and Jeffrey Legro, suggests measuring a norm's strength by the frequency with which it is referenced by statesmen proposing a course of action or legitimizing one already taken.[46] On the iden-

tity front, Glenn Chafetz, Hillel Abramson, and Suzette Grillot employ content analysis of leaders' speeches in order to explain the weapons acquisitions patterns of diverse states. Their research presents a strong correlation between four identity typologies and a "marked tendency toward nuclear acquisition."[47] The method Chafetz et al. suggest for coding role conception can easily be duplicated for other issues.

Extended Observation of Public Behavior

Public reactions to the moves made by state leadership may highlight areas of congruence or cleavage between the understanding of values and norms fostered by the populace and the behavior of state officers. Disaffection may come in the form of protest, local grumbling, or biting humor pointed at political officials, while congruence might manifest itself through strong turnout for state events and parades, voluntary displays of state insignia, or healthy membership in state-related organizations.[48] Congruence or cleavage between separate identity groups may be manifest in part by the degree to which the target group is willing to accumulate and incorporate traditions of food, dress, verbal expression, names given to children,

and entertainments originating elsewhere.[49]

In order to understand identity distinctions within large regions, one might systematically observe social ceremonies and rituals. What is the purpose of the ceremony? Who attends?[50] Which norms violations are publicly punished? Which achievements publicly celebrated? One daily ritual that often sheds light on identity and value structure is the protocol of salutations, especially in conversations between members of the population meeting for the first time. How does one introduce oneself? Is it by way of profession, clan ties, or religious affiliation?[51] Which aspects of personal identity are most valued?

Humor can serve as a useful test for one's grasp of the culture under study. What does this group find funny? Why? Which alternative group is consistently used as the object of ridicule? Which of the alternative group's characteristics are subjected to mockery? How does this illuminate the values of the group being tracked? What does it say about their perception of others?

Language is an indispensable source of cultural information. Not every analyst is going to have the opportunity to become

> *Entertainment media provides valuable insights for those seeking to understand the current state of a particular set of norms within a society.*

fluent in the local tongue but will find that pursuing even novice-level language competence may yield cultural insights. Concepts that a population values are often assigned more words than those that are not. Recent research suggests that language has a profound impact on our perceptual lens. It registers the content of our memories—the aspects of reality that we record, and how we record them.[52]

Evaluating the Output of the Media and the Artistic Community

Depending on the level of independence enjoyed by news, entertainment, and artistic producers within a population, these may yield significant insight into a group's identity and its core norms and values. Twomey notes the onerous level of work involved in a comprehensive review of these sources and commends two authors who have tackled it: Peter Hays Gries on China, and Ted Hopf, on Russia.[53] Even completely controlled media may still offer material for cultural analysis. State propaganda illuminates the identity, norms, and values that the state hopes to achieve, as well as the narrative it hopes will dominate popular perception.

In a free society, the bounds and content of political debates channeled through the press can identify not only cleavages in the strategic and political culture but also points of popular congruence.[54] Sometimes what is *not* addressed is as interesting as what is. Christopher Meyer and Adrian Zdrada isolated a pronounced identity aspect to Poland's willingness to ally with the United States in our runup to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 through content analysis of press debates on the issue. Their research revealed an absence of serious security discussions relating to Iraq and strong emphasis on establishing Polish identity as a reliable US partner. The identity basis of Poland's participation helps explain why the failure to unearth weapons of mass destruction in the Iraqi theater did not diminish the enthusiasm for the US alliance in Poland as it did in Great Britain.[55]

Free media may also serve as a reliable watchdog for norms violations within the state. For example, the flurry of reporting in the United States on excesses in Guantanamo and at Abu Ghraib manifest norms violations that are considered serious and newsworthy in the United States but may not have been treated that way in other countries. As commercial orga-

nizations, media outlets must present a worldview comfortable to their audience. The worldview captured in newscasts validating (especially controversial) state actions may illuminate popular perspectives and narratives that more formal instruments for measuring opinion would miss.[56]

Entertainment media provides valuable insights for those seeking to understand the current state of a particular set of norms within a society. The fabric of television sitcoms is the exaggerated presentation of social *faux pas* and situational conundrums.[57] Sitcoms are also a helpful reference for illustrating a culture's typical problem-solving devices and for illuminating changes underway in society by poking fun at norms that are in flux. TV dramas serve a different purpose—they most often focus on norms violations that are serious enough to be considered tragedy and represent a shared core of values across the society.

Step 5: Assemble Critical Cultural Factors

After analysts have worked to fill cognitive gaps and amassed a sizeable accumulation of cultural data, they are then presented with the painful task of setting much of it aside—honing their data down to those cultural factors that are likely to play a role in the decision-making of *this group* on *this*

The cultural factors that emerge from this rigorous culling process are the Critical Cultural Factors (CCFs).

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issue. The analyst's instructions are to evaluate each cultural factor according to:

- **Relevance** for the issue selected.

- **Robustness** of the factor. [a][58]

  - How well established is it?

  - How widely shared is it among members of this group?

  - To what extent is opinion or behavior that is inconsistent with this aspect of identity, norms, values, or perceptual lens rewarded or punished internally by other members of this group?

- Likelihood of this cultural factor to provoke a **Response** (cooperative or conflictual) when external actors engage this group on this issue.

The cultural factors that emerge from this rigorous culling process are the Critical Cultural Factors (CCFs) for this group on this issue and will be the concepts that are addressed in the finished intelligence product. In intelligence terms, each factor must be solidly connected to a "so-what." What impact is it likely to have on outcomes of interest to US poli-

cymakers? To what degree are we confident that behavior will reflect this cultural influence? How many types of research sources or methods validate this finding?

Step 6: Mapping

After an analyst has isolated the relevant set of CCFs, she is asked to map the primary source of each from among the various cultural influences identified in Step 3 (national, ethnic, tribal, professional, etc.). Are the identity components on the CCFs list confined primarily to one domain (i.e., tribal), or shared across other sources of cultural influence (i.e., ethnic and religious)? What about critical norms and values? What about critical aspects of the group's perceptual lens?

The purpose of this portion of the mapping exercise is to define—for the analyst as well as the eventual audience of her intelligence product—the influence boundaries of the CCFs. Are they spread across the cultural landscape or confined to one or two key cultural influences? Is there a clear, somewhat bounded, cultural force at

play on this issue (i.e., tribal, sectarian, professional/organizational), or are cultural influences widely dispersed and unlikely to provide anything close to a clear script for action?

Step 7: Writing the Paper

Based on the outcome of the mapping exercise, a finished Cultural Topography paper will define for the reader first, which aspects of identity, norms, values and perceptual lens are most important to understand when the United States engages this actor on this issue, and second, the probable influence boundaries of the CCFs identified. These CCFs provide the primary focus of the paper. The paper answers, in specific terms, the following questions:

- Which CCFs represent points of possible leverage and cooperation?

- Which CCF red lines are likely to spark resistance or even armed conflict between foreign elites and their broader populations or between foreign populations and US actors?

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[a] The work of Jeffrey Legro may serve as a useful reference point for this task. He has written extensively on measurement of norm strength and his work on norms probably has some transferability to identity, values and perceptual lens. He proposes that a norm be evaluated according to three criteria: how clearly it is recorded in the rules of society (specificity), how long it has existed within this society and its strength in standing up to normative competitors (durability), and how widely it is accepted and referenced in discourse (concordance).

A handful of papers based on the Cultural Topography method-ology have been produced, but they have prompted reaction to suggest the method offers a way to add analytic value.

• Do most of the CCFs stem from one cultural tradition or source of influence (i.e., ethnic, religious, tribal)? If so, what else do we need to know about this cultural domain in order to acquire adequate context for understanding the CCFs in question?

• Are the members of the group under study drawing from multiple cultural traditions/influences when they respond to this issue? Will it cause them to fracture when pressure is exerted on the myriad aspects of this issue?

• To what extent do adversarial groups in the region share the same cultural mapping on this issue as the group under study, reflecting common sources of cultural influence? Where is this not the case? How does that inform forecasting on future cooperation or divergence between these groups?

• Within which tradition will our messages to this group on this issue be most persuasive?

• How likely are other groups across the region to respond in similar fashion when presented with this issue?

Initial Impact of Cultural Topography

Only a handful of papers based on the Cultural Topography methodology have been produced, but they have prompted sufficient reaction to indicate that the insights they offer get beyond the general body of information already grasped by most analysts and policymakers, and early reactions to such insights suggest that the methodology offers a way to add analytic value:

• In a meeting that was part of a US policy review on a specific country, an attendee not familiar with this methodology reported that several analysts, authors of a Cultural Topography paper on this country, "quickly proved themselves to be as smart or smarter on [country of focus] than anyone else in the room…on history, ethnic topography." It is worth adding that the room was filled with experts who had spent significantly more years on the subject than had these analysts.

• While traveling abroad, a special envoy with significant expertise selected one of the Cultural Topography papers as one of only two items—from a large pile of intelligence materials—he wanted sent back to his office for further study. Several senior commanders also expressed significant interest in this paper.

Additional reactions have been consistent with those noted above, but only the continued application and refinement of this tool will fully display whether its potential is great or limited. The methodology is being taught in at least one IC institution, and several new Cultural Topography papers are in motion now. The main challenge to pursuing and exploiting this approach within the IC is the pressure of daily production driven mostly by conventional collection and analysis. Cultural Topography holds no promise of advancing the understanding of cultural influences on foreign perceptions and actions unless researchers are given the time to find additional, often novel data and then to incorporate them into the tool.

(The appendix and endnotes. are available in the digital version of this article.)

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Appendix A

Cultural Analysis

Concepts and Questions

Identity

- Is individual identity seen as comprising one's distinct, unique self, or is it bound up in a larger group (family, clan, tribe)?[59]

- Does this group see itself as responsible for and capable of solving social problems? Are problems responded to with energy or left to fate?

- Which myths and national narratives compose the stories everyone knows? How do these speak about group identity?

- What is this group's origin story? Does it inform group members of their destiny?

- What would this group list as defining traits of its national, tribal, ethnic character?

- Is one aspect of identity being overplayed, not because it is foundational for most decisions but because it is being threatened or diminished?

Values

- For the linguist, which concepts/things are described in nuanced ways (meaning that many words have been assigned to them)? Which concepts are missing from the language? (For example, the concept of "fair play" is hard to find outside of English.)

- What generates hope in this population?

- Which is viewed more highly as a communicative tool—emotion or logic?   Are conversational styles which emphasize logic viewed as trustworthy?

- Is conspicuous consumption valued as a status marker? If not, what incentives exist to work hard?

- To what extent do security concerns trump liberty concerns in this society? Which parts of liberty are deemed attractive?

- Is social mobility considered a good thing, or is it deemed disruptive to a highly organized system? Would this group fight to keep a hierarchical arrangement even if offered opportunities for egalitarianism?

- To what extent does loyalty trump economic advantage?

- Which is more value-laden for this group—"progress" or "tradition"?

- Is optimism rewarded as a character trait or is it considered naive, juvenile, and possibly dangerous?

- Which character qualities are consistently praised?

- What composes the "good life"?

- What sorts of myths, hero figures, segments of history, or identity markers does the material culture celebrate? What is revealed by the decorations in homes, modes of dress, food eaten (or not eaten), monuments respected (as opposed to those covered with graffiti), gifts given, etc.?

•In describing a proposed project, what will "impress" this audience? The project's size? Its historical relevance? The technology used to produce it? How might new projects best be framed in order to win popular support?

NORMS

Political

•What is considered a legitimate pathway to power? How do "heroes" in film and other popular media obtain their power? Do they act as isolated individualists or in concert with others?

•"What gives a public the comfortable feeling that the way that decisions are reached and leaders are chosen is 'right'?"[60]

•How does the group view compromise?

•Where does "genuine" law come from? (Nature? God? A constitution? Current political institutions? Imagined, future institutions? Moral conscience? A personality from the past?)

•Is adherence to state-manufactured law admired or disdained? To what extent is state law equated with "right" and "wrong"?

Social

•Is social status in this society primarily ascribed (i.e., one is born into it) or achieved? If achieved, how so?[61]

•What are the primary markers of a person of high rank in this society? How would you recognize him/her? Does political power or intellectual prestige rank higher than economic surplus?

•What is the process for establishing trust? How does one know when it has been achieved?

•Do people perceive their own place and the dominant hierarchy as natural?

•To what extent are subordinates responsible for their own actions?[62]

•What do proverbs say about social expectations and the perceived pathway to success?

Economic

•What are the group's views on work? Which types are admired? Which are disdained? What are the economic implications?

•Which economic activities are considered immoral?

•Is it considered appropriate to "master" the natural environment and bend it to one's will?

•To what extent is the economy intertwined with kin obligations?

•What are obstacles to private property ownership?

•How does this culture group stack up when evaluated against the traits some claim are necessary for successful market economies?[63] These can include:

  •Is there trust in the individual?

  •Are wealth and resources perceived as finite or infinite? Is the focus on "what exists" or "what does not yet exist"?

  •Is competition seen as healthy or unacceptably aggressive?

  •Is this society comfortable with a questioning mind?

  •Does the education system encourage investigative learning?

•Are the "lesser virtues"—punctuality, job performance, tidiness, courtesy, efficiency – admired?

•Which are emphasized—small achievements accomplished by the end of the day (preferable for market economies) or grandiose projects (the unfinished megaworks of progress-resistant economies)?

•What is the "radius of trust" in this community? Is trust extended to family only? How far does it extend to strangers?[64]

•What are prestige commodities within this community? Why? Might these serve as stronger incentives for cooperation than direct funding?

•Is risk taking admired or negatively sanctioned? How widely spread is the "harm" of individual failure (damages family honor, potentially ignites retribution cycle, etc.)?

Security
•What defines "victory" for this group in a kinetic conflict?

•What types of battlefield behavior would result in shame?

•What level of internal destruction is acceptable?

•How do accepted myths describe this group's military history? What is its projected destiny?

•Are allies viewed as reliable, or historically treacherous? What is the resultant ethic regarding alliance loyalties?

Time/Change Orientation
•Does this group behave according to linear time? Is there a marked contrast between rural and urban regions? Do deadlines matter?[65]

•What is the future orientation of this group? Does it see itself as capable of changing the near future? Is it deemed appropriate or laudable to make aggressive efforts to do so?

•Which time frames are referenced with strong positive emotion—past or future scenarios?

•Is there a significant gap between socioeconomic expectations and reality? (This often is a precursor of social shifts.)[66]

Problem-Solving Devices
•What is the order of activities for solving a social problem (often called an action chain)? Does face-to-face confrontation happen first or last? Is violence used as a signal or is it an endgame?[67]

•How do those outside of official channels of activity (i.e. women in seclusion, youth in elder-oriented cultures) play a part in problem-solving processes?

•Which is preferred—action or deep deliberation? Is this group comfortable with trial and error as a discovery method?

•Are individuals comfortable with making a wide range of personal choices? Are individual choice and accountability practiced social norms? Would the choices present in democratic and market systems be overwhelming?

•To what extent must community consensus be reached in order for a decision to go forward?

PERCEPTIVE LENS

Cognitive processes
•What sources of information yield 'truth'? Scientific/factual processes? Dreams?[68] Inspired authority figures?

•Are most situations set into dichotomous frames? Are they made to be black and white? How comfortable are group members with situational complexity? How patient are they in working to understand it?

Of Self
•What are the basic expectations about the future? ("Poverty becomes a greater problem the moment wealth is perceived as a definite possibility.")[69] How might typical aspirations within this society be charted?

•How does this group characterize/perceive its own history? Which events are highlighted? Which are omitted?

•What does this group's history tell it about "dangerous" behaviors/circumstances for a society? (For example, Chinese—chaos, Americans—tyranny).

Of Others Generally
•How do members of this group assign intentions? What motives make the most sense to them? (If the best US intentions do not "make sense" to the host population, they will assign intentions that do. It is to our advantage to understand and then emphasize areas of cognitive congruence when embarking on joint ventures.)[70]

•What is this group's view on human nature? Are people generally trustworthy? Are they prone to excess and beset by vices, or are they able to regulate themselves? How are these views used for legitimating less or more government?

•How does this group obtain its information about the outside world? Which sources are considered most reliable? How are those sources biased or deficient?

•Are outsiders perceived as fundamentally different or fairly similar to group members?

Of the US Specifically
•What are regarded by this group as US vulnerabilities?

•What does this group believe drives Americans?[71] What do they value?

•Does this group see common ground with its American counterparts? In which areas?

•To what extent does this group believe American rhetoric matches intentions?

Cosmology (The way the world works...origin and structure of the universe)
•When explanations for events are not easily accessible, how does this group fill in the blanks?

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