

By Lukas Milevski

What is, and is not, unthinkable in defence and security depends upon the culture of the group doing the thinking. Culture is a web of narrative threads on issues, topics and themes relevant to a particular group. In terms of defence and security these narratives concern history, geography, the roles of force and law in society, and so on. Indeed, behaviour generally cannot be isolated from the culture of the acting group without making that behaviour random and meaningless. It is culture that gives meaning to thought and action. Culture is therefore in practice the sovereign context in which not just thinking and judgment take place, but also decision-making and doing. No analyst or decision-maker is autonomous of culture.

In practice, no state is a unitary political or strategic actor. A government is made up of a number of different ministries, occasionally conflicting, each with its own culture, and thus its own priorities, value judgments and methods of decision-making. At lower levels of granularity still, each ministry is itself comprised of discrete offices, each again with its own culture, occasionally conflicting with others, and so on. The holistic strategic culture of a state is therefore essentially an amalgam of a myriad of different tribal mentalities and cultures with the admixture of a sense of greater purpose not typically found within a single tribe itself. This does not just complicate decision-making, but also complicates the lesser task of consensus, due to the inevitable conflicts which will spring up in both discussion and action.

Within this context, friction is inevitable within a strategic culture among the various tribes of the defence and security community. Cracks appear in the façade and cannot be papered over, because disagreements are significant and the respective positions are too far apart to be reconciled among the various defence tribes. Such cracks represent issues dear to one or more of these tribes. These cracks thus represent 'unthinkables,' or issues for which certain outcomes are unthinkable for certain tribes.

Culture is thus hardly homogenous, and this is particularly true for the defence culture. Instead, there is a rough hierarchy of culture, ranging from multiple tribal cultures within the defence community to the holistic strategic culture which is the amalgam of these tribal cultures and which gives them a greater purpose than simply their own self-preservation. Beyond strategic culture is the public culture of the state and the nation, of which strategic culture is a semi-autonomous part. The boundaries are blurred and there can be significant overlap between all cultures. Each of these many cultures entertains its own unthinkables, ranging from the narrowly tribal to the publicly overarching. For instance, it may be unthinkable for the Navy to give up its future carriers despite pressure to do so from other cultures, as the Navy may find a future without carriers unacceptable and hence inconceivable, and fight against such a fate. It may become similarly unthinkable for the public to finance their construction, however.

Strategy is the bridge between the military option and the policy it may have to serve, and the

strategist is the actor who bridges the gap between the military and the polity. Strategic culture must thus also form the bridge, between the narrower tribal cultures and the broader public culture. Strategic culture resides in a hard place, however. The tribal cultures are foremost interested in maintaining themselves; their larger purpose is only of secondary interest for such narrow cultures, when it is remembered at all. Civil-military relations demand that tribal cultures be concerned with the maintenance and employment of force, but not with its direction. Maintaining the armed forces is after all a full-time job by itself, particularly in a storm of extraordinary budgetary pressures. Tribal culture in the defence community thus emphasises the state of forces, the procurement of capabilities and their tactical and operational use; losing big-ticket items is thus unthinkable for each of the three armed services. It would thus be unthinkable for the navy to lose its two aircraft carriers, albeit not necessarily for the three major tribes that comprise navy strategic culture—the submariners may not care, while surface sailors and aviators certainly would. Public culture is concerned with maintaining itself, and indeed prospering further. Public culture has no other purpose as such, it is self-rationalizing in a way that the tribal cultures within the defence community are not and cannot be. Strategic culture is the link between the tribal cultures and the public culture. It must take charge of the former to serve the latter when required to do so. Thus, whereas both tribal and public cultures are insular and focused on propagating themselves, strategic culture emphasizes achieving effects in the service of public culture by safeguarding it from external threats. The unique position strategic culture occupies gives it an overt purpose that cultures usually do not have.

The practice of strategy occurs in a highly uncertain, ambiguous and dynamic world. The strategist will inevitably face a wide range of challenges over the course of his career, and among these challenges there will be some for which the range of available choices can be quite stark. There will thus undoubtedly be certain times when the practicing strategist will have to think the unthinkable to support and safeguard the public. This necessity is not as dire as it first appears, for as already noted what is and is not unthinkable depends on culture, and three basic tiers of culture have been identified – the tribal cultures of the defence community, the broader public culture and the strategic culture which bridges the two constructively. Thus strategists may consider an option that could be unthinkable for the tribal cultures of the defence community. The option of abandoning the future carriers would be such an unthinkable, anathema to the Navy tribal culture but perhaps in the larger picture necessary for the greater good of the public culture. Oppositely, the strategist may consider options that public culture would find reprehensible. Herman Kahn was a master of this art during the Cold War, thinking beyond nuclear Armageddon to theorize on how best to survive it in case nuclear war did indeed occur, thus earning him the infamous description by James Newman as "Genghis Kahn, a monster who had written an insane, pornographic book, a moral tract of mass murder: how to plan it, how to commit it, how to get away with it, how to justify it." There are even cases where the strategist may have to consider options unthinkable to both tribal and public culture. Continuing the mission in Afghanistan may become such an unthinkable: the high pace of operations has been wearing down the operational capabilities around which the tribal cultures revolve and at the same time public support for the war has been waning, which may eventually result in a war neither tribal nor public cultures support even if its continuation is judged to be in the best interests of the West.

One of the narrative strands of strategic culture therefore is about the need to think the

unthinkable, perhaps on a regular basis, as frequently done during the Cold War as the nuclear strategists theorized on nuclear war and even nuclear victory. Strategic culture, although part of public culture, must at the same time be somewhat autonomous of it, sufficiently so to try to fulfil its purpose of taking a longer view and judging how best to protect the public culture from external threats without distorting its core values in the process. Indeed, Western culture is predicated on, among other things, its civil liberties. The hard-headed strategist may see these liberties as a nuisance to his goal of protecting the wider culture, but in the process of this protection, the abrogation of such liberties would destroy the culture itself. One is reminded of that hackneyed Vietnam War quote, "we had to destroy the town to save it." The strategist must not have free reign over defence, but must always remain accountable to the public culture lest such a truly unthinkable result be realized.

Unthinkables are, after all, unthinkable for good reason, but those reasons hold their validity only within the contextual assumptions of culture and of the contemporary situation. This is why scrapping the future aircraft carriers may be unthinkable from a Navy point of view but remain a plausible option for cutting defence costs from a public point of view. Strategy is a balancing act, not just in terms of weighing the value of the various military instruments against each other in the quest for economy in defence but also in its position as the mediator between tribal defence cultures and the public culture. It must balance thinking, and indeed perhaps committing, the unthinkable for tribal culture, significantly reducing capabilities, with that for public culture, financing costly programmes during periods of great financial strain, in order not simply to safeguard the public culture from external threats at a reasonable cost, but also to preserve the tribal cultures and their capabilities, upon which such defence ultimately rests. Strategic culture must mediate between the demands of immediate necessity and preparing for the ever uncertain future; both options become the unthinkable when their logic becomes extreme. Defence policy is the life insurance of the nation and it would be unwise to gamble too much with it regardless of how immediate and pressing budgetary demands may be. Balance is necessary between when a strategist should and should not think the unthinkable, as well as balance for whom the issue may or may not be unthinkable.

Much like tribal and public cultures, strategic culture too has its own distinct unthinkables—or rather, it should have such. The fundamental unthinkable for strategic culture, one that should remain unthought, is betraying the basic values of public culture whose safety it is meant to secure. The strategist may have to think the unthinkable, but he must never forget the purpose of such an exercise. As noted, there are good reasons within cultures why certain themes remain unthinkable. In this regard, it is fortunate that the strategist has a hard time divorcing himself from the public culture. Strategists must not be allowed to destroy the public culture in the process of protecting it.

In conclusion, neither thought nor action can be separated from the wider cultures within which they take place. However, culture is not a homogenous framework within which to think and act. Instead, culture exists at a number of levels, the three basic being those of the defence tribes, of the strategists directing them and of the public that the strategists serve. The outlooks of these three levels of culture are different and this influences their thinking, and by implication what is unthinkable. It is the strategist's duty to think the unthinkable if it can serve and secure the public culture without distorting its fundamental values. It is possible to go too far in thinking

the unthinkable, and destroy something by defending it too zealously. Such a result can be nothing other than failure. Strategy is a balancing act, and thinking the unthinkable is a fine line upon which to balance.

About the author

Lukas is an MA student of Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, currently writing a dissertation on J.C. Wylie's dichotomy of strategy, particularly concerning strategic effect, and expecting to graduate this December. He is also a research intern in the Military Sciences department at RUSI, where he will be working until mid-September.