

## **The Bully, the Underdog, the Shape-Shifter and the Survivor: How Wars will be Fought in the Future<sup>1</sup>**

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This article steps back from the extensive literature on new technologies, strategies and weapons that will dictate how future wars will be fought as espoused by strategic think tanks and military academies worldwide. Instead, I will endeavour to identify how wars will be fought in the future based on the strategic cultures of the actors involved and how they will approach war. Using the ‘2x2 matrix’ methodology that is commonly employed by futurists in developing scenarios (Curry and Schultz, 2009), the article will show how future wars may be fought within the paradigm of four strategic cultures: the large warrior culture; the small warrior culture; the large pragmatic culture; and the small pragmatic culture. Borrowing from the ‘scenarios archetype approach’ in labelling (Curry and Schultz, 2009; see also Dellios & Ferguson, 2013, ch. 6 on the use of metanarratives in scenario construction), I will call these four cultures: the bully, the underdog, the shape-shifter and the survivor. All four of these strategic cultures will be forced to engage in warfare but it will be their method of engagement that ultimately shapes how wars will be fought in the future.

This article begins with the methodology and process used. It continues with an outline of the characteristics of each strategic culture and examples of actors that currently exhibit these characteristics and will likely continue to do so. Finally, a framework for understanding future warfare will be sought by identifying how these four strategic cultures are likely to behave.

I will use a time frame that extends no further than 2025 in the interests of avoiding speculation pertaining to economic trends and military technologies. Furthermore, war will be considered across a wide spectrum, including but not limited to military engagement, information operations, propaganda and deception. Notions of war in this manner are based

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<sup>1</sup> The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors endeavour to publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet academic criteria.

on concepts of ‘unrestricted warfare’ by Qiao, Santoli and Wang (2002) and ‘hybrid warfare’ by the US Government Accountability Office (2010) and Lasica (2009).

## **1. Methodology and Process**

Of the many drivers that can be used in identifying the strategic culture of actors in war, two stand out: one is size and the other concerns a historical tendency towards a warrior ideology<sup>2</sup> vs. pragmatism in times of war. The use of size as a driver is somewhat self-explanatory in its validity to how an actor engages in war. Size is expressed as the simple amalgamation of economic strength, military capabilities and available manpower assessed on a case by case basis. Size has a direct effect on the behaviour of an actor in regards to warfare and how entities fight wars. Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, a renowned classic informing Chinese strategic culture, is particularly attentive to strategies for engagement in war dependent on one’s own and one’s adversary’s strengths and weaknesses. *The Art of War* directly refers to the manpower of the military and its broader considerations, particularly in chapters 1, 3 and 6 on planning, strategies of attack and the weak and the strong, respectively. These allude to the value of size regarding economic and military capabilities in the decisions on how to fight wars. Whilst size can be considered a driver that is fairly easily assessed, the historical tendency towards warrior ideology vs. pragmatism in times of war represents a far more subjective evaluation.

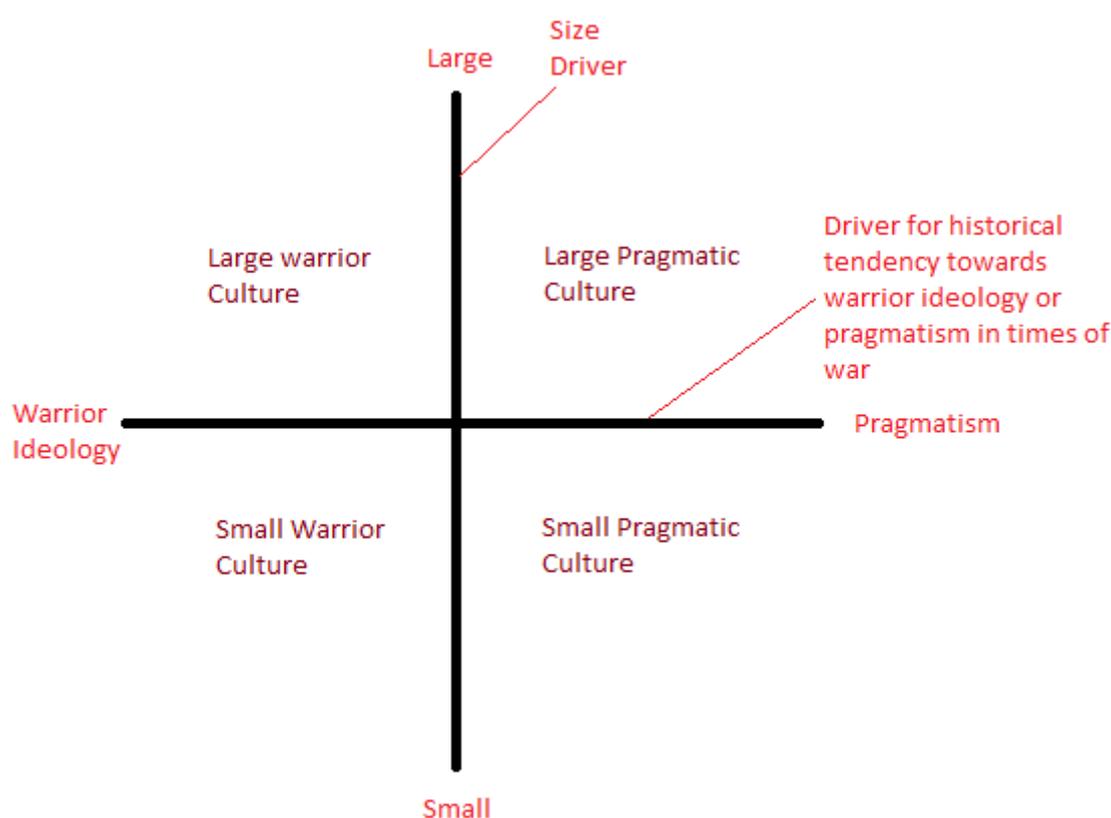
The choice to use historical tendency towards a warrior ideology or pragmatism in times of war as an indicator is based upon the archive of academic research that explains the incidence of warfare, and the ways that different actors engage in warfare as a manifestation of cultural and national psychology. Most prominent in this literature are the works of Pitman (2013) and Chirot and Seligman’s edited volume, *Ethno-political Warfare* (2001). Put simply, cultural psychology will affect how an actor thinks about and thus fights wars. A case by case historical analysis of combatant actors shows that some are more likely to exhibit warrior ideologies if heroism and sacrifice are held in high esteem and if there is a cultural tendency to use force more readily. By contrast, other actors are more likely to fight wars pragmatically with a focus on outwitting an enemy or reframing the war. Of course no actor

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Ideology’ is used here in the sense of ethos rather than systematic doctrine.

is entirely pragmatic or martial in nature; they all exhibit characteristics of both and their allocation in the '2x2 matrix' requires judgement on a case by case basis.

Having established the two drivers for the matrix and how actors would be allocated, it is important to highlight the actual matrix process that is commonly employed in identifying scenarios. According to the '2x2 matrix' approach, the two chosen drivers are expressed as two scales. In the present case, one axis moves from large to small and the other extends from a strong historical tendency towards a warrior ideology in times of war to a strong historical tendency towards pragmatism in times of war. These driver scales are then overlapped perpendicular to each other creating four quadrants as seen in the diagram below.



These four quadrants represent four strategic cultures that are identified as the large warrior culture, the small warrior culture, the large pragmatic culture and the small pragmatic culture to which may be allocated symbolic names that capture their essence. I have chosen the following, though readers may favour other alternatives. Thus the large warrior culture is represented as the 'bully' (because of its disproportionate size and a propensity to fight),<sup>3</sup> while

<sup>3</sup> An alternative could be the archetypal 'hero', though the choice of term depends on the percipient: small powers that are aligned and protected by a greater one would likely see a 'hero', while others that are equally ill-matched but at its mercy might behold a 'bully'.

the ‘underdog’ refers to the small warrior culture. The large pragmatic culture becomes the ‘shape-shifter’ and the small pragmatic culture is the ‘survivor’. These four strategic cultures are comprehensive in that every actor falls into one of the strategic cultures; however actors have degrees to which they can identify with a specific strategic culture due to the scalar nature of the drivers. These strategic cultures are identifiable in terms of characteristics and examples and this provides a useful mechanism to analyse how specific actors are likely to engage and fight wars; in turn shedding light on how wars will be fought in the future.

## **2. Actor Characteristics and Examples**

This section will provide a cursory analysis of the characteristics of all four strategic cultures using examples to clarify. The concept of actor characteristics relates directly to the two drivers used in the matrix i.e. an actor deemed large militarily, economically and in manpower would be identified as the bully or the shape-shifter.

### *2.1 The Bully*

The bully - which could just as easily be perceived as the ‘hero’ – is identified by its large size including strong economy, powerful military and immense manpower; as well as a tendency towards the warrior ethos in times of war by prioritising heroism, sacrifice and hard power above pragmatism. The United States is the most prominent global example of the large warrior strategic culture. The US embodies the size characteristics with a population over 300 million, a per capita GDP of \$49,800 (CIA, 2013) and 41% of all global military spending – almost five times that of the next highest spender (Shah, 2012); it is the most powerful global economy and military. For an insight into the value placed on US heroism and sacrifice look no further than Hollywood with a history of films including Randall Wallace’s *We Were Soldiers*, Tony Scott’s *Top Gun* and the flaunting propaganda of Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh’s *Act Of Valour*. Added to this national psyche that emphasises heroics is a tendency towards military force over alternate solutions. Benvenisti (2005) highlights a number of US post-Cold War conflicts and whilst arguing that the US needed to intervene, he highlights that many of the reasons for intervention were economic or humanitarian-based and that the United States was overly reliant on military solutions to non-military problems. This is not to say that the US is incapable of pragmatic engagement; only

that it is far more aligned with the warrior outlook. Of similar disposition but not stature is the underdog.

## *2.2 The Underdog*

The underdog can be recognized by its small size and identification as a warrior culture rather than privileging pragmatism. A current example of an underdog strategic culture is the Afghan Taliban insurgency. According to Bajoria (2011), the Afghan Taliban enjoys significant support in Southern Afghanistan and its numbers seem to be increasing. The numbers within the Taliban ranks and its exact economic strength from opium exports and other activities are not known; but in comparison to its enemy, a coalition led by the US military, it is small in size. The Taliban, whilst pragmatic in its methods of warfare and economics, i.e. suicide bombing and opium exporting, exemplifies the warrior ethos. Afsar, Samples and Wood (2008) describe the extremely violent warrior culture of the Taliban as a product of the history of Afghan conflicts, aggressive interpretations of Islam, the experiences of the Mujahedeen in the Soviet War and the strict Pashtun warrior code known as Pashtunwali. Other historical actors that exhibit similar characteristics are the Ghurkhas and the Rhodesian Security Forces. The Taliban, however, serves as the best current example, one which is set to remain a significant actor in the immediate future. Another important future actor is represented by the shape-shifter strategic culture.

## *2.3 The Shape-Shifter*

The shape-shifter is identified by its large size and tendency towards pragmatism in war. The People's Republic of China (PRC) exemplifies this strategic culture in modern times and will likely continue to do so into the future towards 2025 and possibly beyond. China has the world's biggest population and military in terms of manpower, plus the second largest economy which is expected to occupy first place in the present decade. Moreover, it is modernising its armed forces as well as protecting 'national security interests in outer space and cyber space' (PRC, 2013). Without question China has the size component. However, it is the pragmatic Chinese approach to war that causes it to embody the shape-shifter strategic culture. Whilst China certainly has a rich warrior culture, it has shown a historical proclivity towards dynamism in times of war including the development of multiple strategic personalities, and consistently adapting to the prevailing warfare environment.

Examples of this pragmatism include the Ming Dynasty's seaborne power projection as well as a return to continental defence when, among other reasons, the land frontiers were threatened; the use of an imperial 'tribute system' to exert influence through soft power rather than hard; the Maoist insurgency of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; and most recently the overarching holistic 'informationised' approach to modernising the People's Liberation Army (PLA). According to its 2013 defence white paper, titled *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, China has been 'building an informationized military' that has not only improved its warfighting capabilities but also developed its military diplomacy and operations-other-than-war: 'China's armed forces adapt themselves to the new changes of security threats, and emphasize the employment of armed forces in peacetime. They actively participate in and assist China's economic and social development, and resolutely accomplish urgent, difficult, hazardous, and arduous tasks involving emergency rescue and disaster relief' (PRC, 2013). For a nation as large as the PRC its pragmatism is exceptional; however it is a feature that is also identified in the survivor strategic culture.

#### *2.4 The Survivor*

The survivor can be characterised by its small size as well as its tendency towards pragmatism in times of war. Two very different actors that conform to this strategic culture are the Free Tibet Movement and Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is considered relatively well funded and the Free Tibet Movement is well supported, but compared to their adversaries they pale in comparison. The two parties however differ in their pragmatic approaches to warfare. Instead of relying on violent insurgency, the Free Tibet Movement has formulated a transnational advocacy network to leverage its conflict. Its cause is played on an international stage with the endearing peace-advocate, the Dalai Lama, as the movement's star performer (see Noakes, 2012). This shows a tactful disposition toward warfare and the employment of soft power via international pressure; a pragmatic approach.

Entirely different is Al Qaeda's approach. Contrary to popular belief Al Qaeda is far less of an organisation today and instead has inextricably tied itself to the extreme Sunni Islamic sect, most commonly known as Wahhabism, whilst packaging itself as the 'Vanguard of Salafi Jihad'<sup>4</sup> (Hellmich, 2011). Its pragmatism goes beyond innovative tactics and global roaming but has actually allowed it to transcend the organisation framework and become far

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'Jihad' here refers to violent external Jihad as perverted by extremist Islamic sects and further circulated by Western media outlets. It does not represent true Jihad which for most Muslims is a mostly internal struggle to live in a righteous and correct manner.

more effective as an ideological construct. Such pragmatism firmly entrenches it within the survivor strategic culture.

This examination of the types of actors who conform with the four strategic cultures is only cursory, and further research is needed in better identifying patterns and classifying actors in war. However the foregoing prepares the ground for assessing how each strategic culture is likely to fight future wars.

### **3. How Actors will Approach and Engage in Future Wars**

#### *3.1 The Bully*

Those actors that fall into the bully strategic culture will likely remain relatively rigid in their projection of size and power. For example, the United States in Afghanistan refused to limit its reliance on fast air power six years into the conflict even when it was not working efficiently and was causing extensive civilian backlash (Burke, 2007). Another example of the refusal to alter strategy from the warrior ethos was shown by the ill-thought invasion of Iraq which weakened the Afghan effort and damaged the reputation of the United States within the international community. It is likely that the US and other 'bully' strategic cultures will rely in the immediate future on continual advancement of high-tech weapons platforms, regardless of their compatibility to particular theatres of war. They will also maintain reliance on air power, especially technical advancements in Close Air Support, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and emerging laser technology (Jogerst, 2009). Finally it is unlikely we will see a reduction in military-based solutions coming out of this strategic culture, as exemplified by the US 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' to Asia and its Special Operations Forces' focus on Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Similar reliability can be placed on the underdog.

#### *3.2 The Underdog*

The underdog strategic culture will be represented until 2025 and beyond by actors that for the most part have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. They will continue to be prevalent as the world's foremost strategic culture in insurgencies and will be representative of cultures with strong warrior and conflict engagement backgrounds. The asymmetric war fighting techniques used by actors such as the Viet Cong and the Afghan Taliban will endure, as this approach allows them to effectively engage enemies in bloody and protracted wars.

The Taliban as a small warrior strategic culture has shown itself resistant to bending to the will of the West. It has also displayed a proclivity to brutal and traditionally taboo tactics, including torture, execution, suicide bombing and the use of improvised explosive devices that domestic constituencies in the West find disturbing (Johnson, 2013). These tactics, a lack of alternatives and a strong commitment to their cause suggest it is unlikely that underdog actors will divert from the way they currently fight wars. This warrior-based strategic culture is far easier to predict<sup>5</sup> than that of the shape-shifter or survivor.

### *3.3 The Shape-Shifter*

The shape-shifter strategic culture is likely to be the most important strategic culture of the foreseeable future. How these actors will fight wars will be predicated on dynamic pragmatism. Simply, actors such as China will continue to engage in war in a holistic and largely unpredictable manner. If using China as the prime example for the shape-shifter then it is likely that its future warfare techniques will be influenced by three trends. The first, as expressed by Qiao, Santoli and Wang (2002), is the Chinese conception of warfare as unrestricted: the strategic battlefields may be found across all areas of economics, politics, soft and hard power. The second trend is the focus on ‘informationisation’ of the military and full integration of the martial and civil entities (PRC, 2010). And most importantly, in the third trend, China, unlike the often ungainly and over-reactive United States, will continually strive to interpret unrestricted warfare as the embodiment of what in Western theory is known as a ‘complex adaptive system’. This means actively fostering opportunities for change (on Chinese concepts of change and complexity theory, see Dellios & Ferguson, 2013, ch. 6) instead of being hamstrung by unexpected threats. This powerful amalgamation of pragmatism and size will make the shape-shifter the most important and unpredictable strategic culture when trying to understand how wars will be fought until 2025.

### *3.4 The Survivor*

Like the shape-shifter strategic culture, actors that fall into the survivor category will continue to elude accurate assessment of how they will fight future wars because of their inherent pragmatism and unconventionality. It is for this reason that professionals within the security, government and military fields must constantly assess these actors on a case by case basis within the small, pragmatic strategic culture framework. For example, in the case of Al

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<sup>5</sup> Prediction in this case refers to actor prediction within the strategic tier and does not extend to predictability at the tactical level.

Qaeda it is likely that the future will see a continuation of history whereby US-led Western forces hunt the group and its proxies and engage in large conflicts only for Al Qaeda to relocate, change tactics and, according to Buchanan (2013), attack the United States and its allies in new and distinctive ways as a ‘blowback’ style response to US action in sacred Islamic lands. Currently, Al Qaeda is shifting its primary focus from the Middle East to North Africa and pushing further south to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Another example concerns the small, pragmatic Free Tibet Movement which is set to experience significant change. It remains unclear what strategy will be undertaken after the death of the 78-year-old Dalai Lama but there is strong support for more aggressive action. This would reflect significant pragmatism in the adaptation of tactics and strategy resulting from a forced position for the small survivor movement. The only predictability to these pragmatic strategic cultures – large and small – is unpredictability. That the examples here, those of China and the Free Tibet Movement, are adversaries multiplies the predictability problem.

All of these strategic cultures are present in society today and have been for centuries. They encompass the full spectrum of strategic culture as it relates to the two drivers: size and tendency towards the warrior ideology vs. pragmatism in times of war. These strategic cultures are likely to be present in the future also and will shape how wars are fought as they manifest themselves through specific actors. This does not mean that actors definitively fall into only one of the four strategic cultures and there is the possibility for actors to redefine themselves, including their strategic cultures, as their circumstances change. This might occur when regional norms become more pronounced than traditional strategic cultures, as would be expected in the case of members of the European Union or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The framework here simply provides a mechanism that can be used to identify how different actors are disposed to view war and how they are likely to engage against other actors in future conflict scenarios. This framework will allow conflict analysis for an array of contingencies, including possible friction as a consequence of the rise of China, the future directions of radical Islam as well as the myriad causes for insurrections internationally.

## **Conclusion**

This article has endeavoured to look through a cultural lens of analysis at the actors involved in war and how they can be defined. A set of four strategic cultures based on two drivers have been identified: actor size and tendency towards warrior ideology vs. pragmatism in war. The

‘2x2 matrix’ approach was used to analyse these drivers and four strategic cultures emerged: the bully, the underdog, the shape-shifter and the survivor.

The first section laid out this process and methodology so that the second and third sections could focus on actor characteristics and their likely approaches to war. Throughout the second and third section actor examples were taken from the modern conflict environment including the United States, the Afghan Taliban, China, Al Qaeda and the Free Tibet Movement. Finally, this process allowed the creation of a framework for analysis of how future wars will be fought. It should be noted that this work is limited by the highly focused method of the ‘2x2 matrix’ which is dependent on driver selection (a subjective judgement) and the absence of a ‘wild card’ outside the matrix to address the need for factoring in the unexpected or novel.

However, this article’s aim was not to provide a thorough analysis of how future wars will be fought. Instead, it has endeavoured to highlight the importance of the role of strategic culture in the study of future warfare. In light of this, the framework presented here may prove useful in facilitating more comprehensive research into classification of actors and how they fight wars. This, in turn, would hopefully find application in conflict management and where possible, prevention.

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