Strategic Culture and CSDP: The Case of Libya

by Daniel Göler*

The influence of strategic cultures on decision-making in the area of foreign and security policy is largely undisputed in (political) science today. The domestic public discourses around the military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the position - or re-positioning – of European governments in the past ten years has clearly demonstrated this. At the level of the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) this influence of the population’s attitude on security-policy decisions creates additional problems compared to normal nation states: at the nation state level the main challenge which arises is to align strategic culture at the elite and population level with concrete security policy challenges, whilst at the EU-level the problem is that there is such a strong divergence, occasionally even contradiction between the strategic cultures of the individual member states, that no guidelines for action can be derived from them. Accordingly, the threat of a blockade of the CSDP based upon these differing strategic cultures is therefore given. The European Security Strategy 2003 reflects this problem and demands, “We need to develop a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention.”¹

Taking into account the increasing influence of public opinion on foreign policy decision making processes, this article aims to shed light upon the contentions surrounding the Libya crisis and demonstrate that these should not be viewed as a mere “political accident,” but rather, largely as the result of greatly differing normative approaches to the deployment of armed forces, especially in France, Great Britain, and Germany. Since the debate on the discord within the EU mainly alluded to Germany’s abstention in the UN Security Council, the following analysis focuses on the German position. Drawing on the Strategic Culture approach, the German voting behaviour is explained as the result of two fundamental problems of German security policy: the debate about new strategic priorities has been postponed since the end of the Cold War and there is a continued discrepancy between policy-makers on the one hand who are aware of the necessity of an increased military commitment, and on the other hand the general public who continue to be dominated by a strong pacifist reflex. By applying the Strategic Culture approach, these two structural challenges of German foreign and security policy are examined based on the Libya crisis in order

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to then discuss the consequences for European Common Security and Defence Policy in view of France and Great Britain’s positions.

**The Strategic Culture Approach**

The “Strategic Culture” concept was developed by Jack Snyder in the second half of the 1970ies in a critical examination of the US-American nuclear deterrence strategy.² The concept is based upon the assumption that deterrence can only work, if all involved parties have a similar idea of the deployment of military means. For if the Soviet perception had been dominated by the idea that overcoming capitalism would have justified its own destruction, a security policy based upon power and countervailing power-building would have been clearly misguided. And so - according to the practical reasoning of the Strategic Culture approach – a forward-looking security policy may not limit itself to analyzing the military capabilities of the opponent, it must also consider its idea of deploying military means. In the early 1980s the Strategic Culture approach was then extended to address general questions of security political behaviour, although the central research questions continued to focus on the normative, cultural and ethical perceptions of the use of military means.³

Despite this common basic approach, no cohesive theory model has so far been developed,⁴ so that one may find “a great deal of confusion over what it is that strategic culture is supposed to explain, how it is supposed to explain it, and how much it does explain”⁵ in the relevant literature. This is especially due to the fact that there are three “schools” or “generations” within strategic culture research. The first regards Strategic Culture as a context in which security political behaviour of states is embedded.⁶ The second generation aims to discover the differences between officially proclaimed strategic culture and the “true” motives of decision-makers.⁷ Finally, the third approach, based upon a positivist scientific understanding, views Strategic Culture as an independent variable which largely determines security political behaviour.

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of states.\textsuperscript{8} However in order to discuss the matter at hand, this theoretical dispute may be disregarded. A further aspect which remains unclear in Strategic Culture research is that of the exact object of analysis. Though there is a consensus that it deals with norms, values, and ethical foundations of the use of military means, which in sum may be termed as Strategic Culture, there is a continued debate as to whether these should primarily be analyzed by examining the attitudes of elites or rather by examining those of the broad public. Snyder still defined Strategic Culture as “a set of semi-permanent elite beliefs, attitudes and behaviour patterns socialized into a distinctive mode of thought.”\textsuperscript{9} And to some extent elites are still regarded as “gatekeeper” and “carrier” of strategic cultures in current literature,\textsuperscript{10} for in the end they are the ones who decide whether and to what extent military means are deployed. Yet since the experience of the past years has shown that at least in democratic societies public opinion is often as decisive as that of the elites, more and more analyses have favoured a broader scope adding a deep analysis of public opinion to the investigation of elite positions. So for the mainstream of today’s strategic culture literature “public opinion is an important part of the ideational milieu that defines strategic culture.”\textsuperscript{11} Especially the German discussions regarding the Libya crisis have confirmed this broader approach, since the positioning of the Federal Republic was strongly influenced by the population’s deliberations on the acceptance of a military mission.

The aforementioned epistemological debates may also be viewed as a main reason why no universal definition of Strategic Culture has established itself so far. A comparison of the various approaches however, indicates that a certain type of “core consensus” on what Strategic Culture is exists: “[The] beliefs and assumptions that frame [...] choices about international military behaviour, particularly those concerning decisions to go to war [...] and levels of wartime casualties that would be acceptable” is at the core.\textsuperscript{12} For a long time an additional problem of the Strategic Culture approach was that it was underdeveloped in regards to it operationalisation and empir-
This deficit was resolved by recent studies, which developed elaborated frameworks of analysis. Even if the diverse frameworks have different categories of analysis, they consider more or less the same aspects as important for a country’s strategic culture: (1) justified goals of the use of military means; (2) the way in which military power is exercised; (3) the readiness to accept own casualties as well as those of others; (4) the significance of cooperation in relation to autonomy of taking action; (5) the preferred types of cooperation and (6) the necessary degree of international legitimation as well as (7) the necessary degree of domestic legitimation.

The following shall not discuss all elements, but shall rather, in adherence to the initial thesis, examine on the one hand, to what extent the German position in the Libya crisis resulted from a lack of clarification of goals and purpose of the deployment of military means based upon individual categories. On the other hand it shall be demonstrated that the discrepancies between the opinion of the population and that of the policy-makers influenced the German positioning significantly.

2. The German Culture of Reservation

A fundamental problem of German security and defence policy are the ambiguous strategic priorities. Upon consulting key strategy document, one will find a relatively unclear image. For the Defence Policy Guidelines issued during the SPD-Green Schröder government in 2003 as well as the White Paper on Defence Policy, adopted in 2006 under the SPD-CDU-CSU Merkel government, in essence only list possible deployment scenarios, yet do not undertake a clear setting of priorities. Merely the significance of the traditional task of territory protection is relativised within the international constellation. The Defence Policy Guidelines of 2011, adopted

15 See: Göler, Die strategische Kultur der Bundesrepublik. p. 188-189.
17 See: Weißbuch 2006 zur Sicherheitspolitik Deutschlands und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr, Berlin 2006
shortly after the abstention on the Libya mandate, have a similar approach and by underlining cyber war and economic-political interests extend the scope of possible deployment scenarios.\textsuperscript{18} Though it is emphasized that the Bundeswehr should develop a “prioritized capability profile.”\textsuperscript{19} this is a requirement for the future for which the Defence Policy Guidelines offer no answers. The situation is similar in regard to a geographical prioritization: since it has been repeatedly stated that the so-called new threat scenarios have a global character, the potential operational areas are also viewed as global.\textsuperscript{20} On the one hand this clearly indicates a renunciation of a former comprehension of security focused on Europe, on the other hand the question of strategically important areas of interest remains unanswered. The heated debate caused by German President Köhler’s call for a proactive security strategy, protecting Germany’s, interests as a major industrial and trade nation also by military means, illustrated the difficulties (or even impossibility) of an open debate on strategic priorities in Germany. In the end, President Köhler resigned because of the massive critique from the opposition and the missing support from the governing coalition.\textsuperscript{21}

Whilst strategy documents view almost any type of deployment worldwide as conceivable and thereby evade the discussion on setting a focus or defining interests, far more differentiated positions may be found among the population. According to a survey from the year the White Paper was adopted – conducted by a Bundeswehr-owned research institute – stabilizing crises regions is identified as an important area for national armed forces, however with a varying setting of priorities.\textsuperscript{22} although 63% of the population believe that intervening in European crises regions with missions of stabilization is part of their duty, only 33% believe this in regard to the Middle East and merely 31% in the case of African crises regions.\textsuperscript{23} And there is also a clear differentiation in regard to mission goals: only in the case of an imminent genocide would a majority of 56% approve of an intervention of the Bundeswehr. In the case of

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\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. P.14.
\textsuperscript{23} See: ibid.
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conducting democratic elections only 38% would approve and when it comes to the
disempowerment of a government which violates human rights, i.e. the scenario
which applies to Libya, a mere 18% would approve.\textsuperscript{24} The fact that over the past
years (2006 to 2010) only a minority of the German population (between 19% and
26%) believed that war can be necessary under certain circumstances in order to
attain justice can be interpreted similarly; a clear majority rejects this statement (be-
tween 74 and 80%).\textsuperscript{25}

Closely linked with the question of the aim of the deployment of military means is the
acceptance of own casualties as well as those of others is. In both cases the accep-
tance by the German public is very low, so that from a political side these topics have
become to a certain degree a taboo. The debate over whether a memorial for sol-
diers killed in action should be erected in Berlin clearly demonstrates this as well as
the domestic discussion concerning the introduction of a medal for bravery in battle
and the fact that German politicians have been avoiding for a long time terming the
deployment in Afghanistan within the ISAF framework as “war”. A similar discussion
in France or Great Britain is hardly imaginable. Yet not only own victims, but also vic-
tims of the others are barely accepted by the public, as the strong criticism of the
bombarding of two trucks authorized by the Bundeswehr in Kundus during the ISAF
mission in Afghanistan shows. The media reacted to this bombardment with outrage,
partly due to the civilian victims, but also due to the fact that the responsible German
colonel had explicitly given the order to “eliminate” Taliban leaders.\textsuperscript{26} The principle
that killing of opponents (instead of arresting them) can be both necessary and le-
gitimate in war or war-like circumstances – unlike in the case of domestic police mis-
sions – was disregarded in the domestic political debate. Such a rejection of victims
by the population clearly contradicts the very broad deployment scenarios of the
Bundeswehr which are listed in the strategy documents and poses a basic problem of
the current security political debate in Germany. In other words: there is no proper
foreign policy-strategy consensus.

Against this background, German participation in military missions is a fundamentally
difficult task. The necessity of a detailed parliamentarian mandate for every deploy-
ment makes the situation even more challenging, for not only does the question of

\textsuperscript{24} See: ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} See: Transatlantic Trends 2010. Top-Line Data (Transatlantic trends.org), p.68. 2006-2010 the figu-
res fluctuated between 19/26 and 74/80
\textsuperscript{26} Hebestreit, Steffen: Oberst wollte Taliban töten, in: Frankfurter Rundschau, December 11, 2009.
“whether”, but also the how of a deployment (e.g. fighter jets, heavy artillery, etc.) need to be discussed in a manner which appeals to the public. The experience gained from deployments abroad so far, have shown that German participation, only took place in the past very reluctantly, after an extensive domestic political discussion process, and within a preferably limited framework; additionally, a clear preference for missions with low intensity and a slight probability of being engaged in combat actions can be noted. In the few cases, where Germany has been engaged in combat actions, these missions were either justified by “extreme situations” – as it was the case in Kosovo in face of massive ethnic cleansing – or they were the result of a longer development, in which either a humanitarian or stabilisation mission had escalated, like in Afghanistan.

One of German politics’ main challenges in the Libya crisis was that within a relatively short time frame a decision had to be made regarding an offensive combat mission with an uncertain outcome. Up until the turn of the year 2010/2011 Libya, as well as the rest of the region, had been viewed as mostly stable. When, after the change of regime in Tunisia and Egypt, protests emerged in Libya, one initially expected a regime change here as well. Only when the violence escalated in February 2011 and the UN Security Council Resolution 1970 from February 26th showed no effect, the question of a military intervention arose and became urgent on the international agenda. Whilst especially France and Great Britain called for military intervention within the framework of a no-fly zone, to begin with, the USA was undecided. On March 2nd Secretary of Defence Gates warned that this would imply a military attack against Libya.27

The German government was therefore compelled to take a stance on the question of a military deployment within a relatively limited amount of time. It faced the problem that although the population and all political parties supported the democratic movements in the Arab world, military missions on the African continent are regarded very critically in Germany. Accordingly, the Federal Republic has shown itself very reserved towards all CSDP missions in Africa, or, as was the case with the EUFOR

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RD Congo, was only prepared, following massive political pressure to take on a leading role, which was viewed very critically by the public.\textsuperscript{28}

The severe protests against civilian collateral damages, which took place after the airstrike on the trucks in Kundus, can be considered as the main explanation for the low willingness of the federal government to participate in an air campaign against the Gaddafí regime.; particularly, when dealing with Gaddafí, a ruler who – similar to the Taliban in Afghanistan or Milosevic in the Kosovo War – demonstrate its readiness to provoke civilian casualties in order to influence public opinion in the West. In the Bundestag debate about the German abstention in the UN Security Council Foreign Minister Westerwelle stated the danger of civilian casualties as the decisive argument for Germany’s position.\textsuperscript{29} The chairmen of the committee on foreign affairs, Ruprecht Polenz (member of Angela Merkel’s party), also explicitly pointed out the danger of causing civilian casualties due to human shields.\textsuperscript{30} The decision not to participate in a no-fly zone is therefore understandable in view of the public opinion, even more so as there was insufficient time for a longer process of opinion building and convincing the public. Incidentally, the fundamental approach not to actively participate in the mission was shared by all parliamentary party leaders.

Germany’s voting behaviour in the UN Security Council has to be considered on the backdrop of this aforementioned situation.. In other words the question was: how should one vote if one does not want to actively participate in implementing a no-fly zone. As the ensuing debate in the Bundestag showed, the fear of the federal government was that in the long-run it would not be able to evade an active participation with fighter jets in case of a German consent to the UN-Resolution 1973, particularly, as the discussion repeatedly stressed the capabilities of German ECR Tornados.\textsuperscript{31} The unclear situation in Libya and the repeatedly demonstrated military insufficiency of the Gaddafí-opponents indicated that the conflict would not be resolved quickly. Given the domestic political situation in which large parts of the opposition but also of the government parties and public opinion opposed a German military deployment in Libya, the German government, had it approved the UN mandate, faced being “trapped” between international demands and domestic resistance. During the proc-

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[29] Guido Westerwelle in the Bundestag debate March 18, 2011
\item[30] Ruprecht Polenz in the Bundestag debate March 18, 2011
\item[31] Schwere Kämpfe in Libyen, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, March 17, 2011.
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ess of weighing off the consequences, the foreign political damage which an abstention would effect was weighed off as far less than the domestic and foreign political damage a long-lasting debate on the substantial contribution by Germany to the combat mission would have resulted in.

The French-British draft for UN Resolution 1973 was presented at short notice and was not limited to a no-fly zone, but included all measures to protect the civilian population – with the exception of occupation troops, thereby increasing the danger of an active involvement in military disputes, without any certainty about the goals of Gaddafi’s opponents, which heightened public scepticism. Accordingly, the German ambassador to the UN justified the German abstention with the following, “those [countries] that participated in its [i.e. the resolutions] implementation could be drawn into a protracted military conflict.”

The deputy chairman of the Green parliamentarian group in the Bundestag, Frithjof Schmidt, stated such thoughts in a Bundestag debate on March 16th: “The understandable wish to help quickly should not lead us to do things which do not work militarily and are counter-productive” (translation by D.G.).

This approach found support among the population, for an Emnid survey showed that 56% of those surveyed supported Germany’s abstention and only 36% thought it was wrong. The situation becomes even more distinct, when it comes to asking about a possible active German participation in a combat mission: 70% of those surveyed opposed a German participation in the enforcement of a no-fly zone.

Taking this into account, the German position should not be viewed as an accident, but rather as the logical consequence of two fundamental elements of German Strategic Culture: firstly, a far-reaching strategic culture of reservation and rejection of military deployments and secondly, the reluctance of policy-makers to develop a clear strategic concept for the deployment of the Bundeswehr, which will inevitably contradict public opinions to some extent. Therefore, military combat missions involving the Bundeswehr are only politically implementable in certain exceptional circum-

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32 See UN Resolution 1973: “To take all necessary measures, notwithstanding paragraph 9 of resolution 1970 (2011), to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force"
33 Documentation by the UN of the Security Council meeting (http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10200.doc.htm#Resolution)
34 Frithjof Schmidt in the Bundestags debate on March 16, 2011.
stances and only after an extensive lead time; both factors were not given in the case of Libya, since the decisions had to be made at short notice and the situation in Libya was very unclear. The only alternative to Germany’s behaviour which would have been enforceable from a domestic point of view, would have been for Germany to vote in favour of the UN Resolution and not to participate or to only participate below the threshold of active participation in combat missions. However, such an approach would have also led to clashes with alliance partners, for the call for an active German participation would have increased with the prolonged duration of the combat mission. And such a scenario would have also demonstrated that the European Union is not capable of comprehensive crisis management.

Conclusion

The discussions revolving around the Libya mission have once again illustrated the problems which arise from differing strategic cultures and prohibit a unified approach within the CSDP context. It is especially problematic that the views of Germany, France, and Great Britain are so disparate as to what justifies the use of military means. Based upon the limited capabilities of European states a common policy within the framework of the CSDP is only possible to a limited extent, should one of the large states deviate. The political consequences are even more problematic, if Germany as the largest EU state with the strongest economy does not participate in a common European operation. As mentioned above, a German vote in favor of UN Resolution 1973 would hardly have changed anything, since the lack of European unity would have become evident at the latest with the beginning of the combat mission.

As long as there is no consensus on the goals, purposes, and fundamental principles of military deployments within the EU, focusing on the development of skills of battle groups or discussing a European headquarters is hardly comprehensive enough for European Security and Defence Policy. Yet in this regard the attitudes among the member states continue to differ greatly. In view of the past eight years the goal of developing a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention stated in the European Security Strategy in 2003 must be evaluated as wishful thinking which could not be achieved in the medium term. Instead of attempt-

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ing to gloss over or even out differences – which the ESS does to some extent – an open and honest “taking stock” of the differences would be sensible. Based upon this a joint Strategic Culture of the EU could emerge. Such a joint Strategic Culture would then represent the intersection of the strategic cultures of the individual member states. European security and defence policies based upon such a joint strategic culture would then needless to say be able to cover a much more limited spectrum of capabilities. This would in turn limit the EU’s absolute capacity to act, but its foreign political credibility would clearly increase.