

# ON THE VARIABLE OF STRATEGIC CULTURE: MODUS OPERANDI OF MILITARY INTERVENTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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## Abstract

*The research subject of this article is the variable of strategic culture that has been subjected to some academic inertia since the Cold War period. The aim of this article is to define practical implications of the strategic culture through the prism of the neoclassical realist theory. It supports the argument that military interventional precedents in the Middle East since 2011 have been revealing adaptive considerations of the strategic culture as an intervening variable that implies interventional military decisions by the U.S. and its coalition partners.*

*The first part of the article defines the precise role of this intervening variable as military interventional precedents are researched. This task is conducted by defining the general understanding of interventional initiatives, revealing structured assumptions of the neoclassical realist theory, and reconsidering the role of the strategic culture within that theoretical framework.*

*The second part of the article shifts the attention to supportive empirical considerations regarding the strategic culture and perception of operational ideas – two specifically highlighted neoclassical realist assumptions. The article discloses that Western strategic culture is a changing intervening variable with a different level of permissiveness. A changing continuum of permissiveness is implied by interventional experiences that shape perception of the structural environment and dictate preferences for the power scale of interventional decisions. From this, the level of the structural environment's permissiveness is defined. This permissiveness is associated with capabilities for implementing political objectives without further escalations of military power. Once the systemic environment becomes more*

*permissive, the possibility of activating military intervention of various force-escalation becomes more conceivable.*

**Keywords:** the neoclassical realist theory, military interventions, strategic culture, Middle East

## Introduction

The dynamic evolution of conflicting tensions in the Middle East since early 2011 has revealed a complex environment of security policy decision making. Since the Arab Spring in late 2010 and early 2011, the Middle East has been the arena of multiple epicentres of social disturbance and civil conflicts: ranging from protests in Tunisia, Turkey and Bahrain up the scale to intense civil wars in Yemen and Syria. Western countries have not chosen to perform the role of passive onlookers in these turbulent geopolitical surroundings. In the words of the neoclassical realist theorists, systemic stimuli from the Middle East towards European capitals and Washington could not be ignored (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016 pp. 56-57). That is why, understanding the region through the foreign policy decision-making process matters. An understanding of the structural environment of the region, classification of the systemic stimuli that has arisen from there and reactive security policy measures to these stimuli form the arc of the research of this article.

The research subject of this article is concentrated on the notion of strategic culture that implies interventional military decisions by the U.S. and its coalition partners in the Middle East. Since 2011, the region of interest has been faced with multiple interventions defined by the common use of military capabilities but ranging in force escalation and levels of international support. The aim of this article is to define the practical implications of the idea of strategic culture through the prism of the neoclassical realist theory.

The notion of the strategic culture is claimed as an academic subject of contemporary political science that is still concerned by certain research inertia back in the Cold War period. Since then, Jack Snyder coined the term in a comparative monograph covering the Soviet strategic culture and its implications for the U.S. strategic conduct (Snyder 1977). Later, Ken Booth conceptualised the strategic culture

by setting the definition: “the concept of strategic culture refers to a nation’s traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behaviour, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force” (Booth 1990, p. 121). Furthermore, this conceptualised definition has provided some basis for further definitions of the subject that have been bouncing between cultural considerations (Echevarria 2014, pp. 35-36) and adaptive rationality (Johnston 1995, p. 34). These efforts have covered values, attitudes and behavioural patterns as well as adaptive environment considerations where military options of security policy are concerned.

Apart from numerous theoretical and methodological works of political science researchers, this article has also been influenced by relevant research initiatives aimed at an interdisciplinary approach. The need to understand the context of the structural environment is parallel to what Steven Cook has analysed in his book *False Dawn: Protests, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East* (Cook 2017). The political process within fragmented societies of the Middle East cannot be evaluated in the same way as the process of democratisation is perceived through Western eyes. That is why interventional campaigns need to be decided in accordance with the regional empirical environment and clear political objectives. These factors are driven by interventional foreign and security policy experiences that suggest empirical bases for the adaptive rationality throughout the decision-making process and provide valuable inputs for the consideration of the strategic culture.

This article supports the argument that military interventional precedents in the Middle East reveal adaptive considerations of the strategic culture. The research is based on qualitative analysis and reveals the conditions and causal effects of how strategic culture becomes inter-related with the cognitive approach to the structural environment of potential interventional areas, and the process of how military operations are invoked and conducted. The starting point of the strategic culture research is based on the role of the intervening variable defined as a broader notion that includes expected beliefs, world views, shared expectations of society and adaptive conduct by decision makers (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, p. 66). What is more, the article refers to an additional solution of how the defined broad notion is operationalised as it provides combined insight on contemporary military interventions in the Middle East.

The first part of the article deals with the task of defining the precise role of the intervening variable of the strategic culture as military interventional precedents are researched. This task is conducted by defining the general understanding of interventional initiatives, revealing structured assumptions of the neoclassical realist theory, and reconsidering the role of the strategic culture within that theoretical framework.

The second part of the article shifts the attention to supportive empirical considerations regarding the strategic culture and perception of operational ideas – two specifically highlighted elements of the neoclassical realist assumptions. This part of the article illustrates that Western strategic culture is a changing intervening variable with a different level of permissiveness. The permissiveness is implied by the perception of operational ideas of military interventions when dealing with the complexities of the contemporary Middle East. The tendencies of modern warfare in the region suggest that the complexity is understood by the scope of multiple confrontations on ethnic, social, and religious lines among fragmented groups in the areas of interventional operations.

Furthermore, this article suggests that the complexity factor defines the alleged classification of the structural environment's permissiveness and points towards the strategic culture changing. More than that, an underestimation of the interventional environment usually leads to pure operational planning with an increased need to struggle for additional material resources and the assurance of social-political mobilisation for the cause of interventional war. Modern history provides an illustration of these matters during the conduct of the campaign "Iraqi Freedom" (Gordon and Trainor 2006, pp. 160-163). As interventional precedents swirl through the region, valuable accounts and initial research papers on recent military operations have been considered in this article too. Relevant empirical portions of "Odyssey Dawn" and "Unified Protector" in Libya and "Inherent Resolve" being conducted in operational areas of contemporary Iraq and Syria highlight the need for the research that is reflected in this article.

## Reconsidering the Analytic Approach to the Strategic Culture

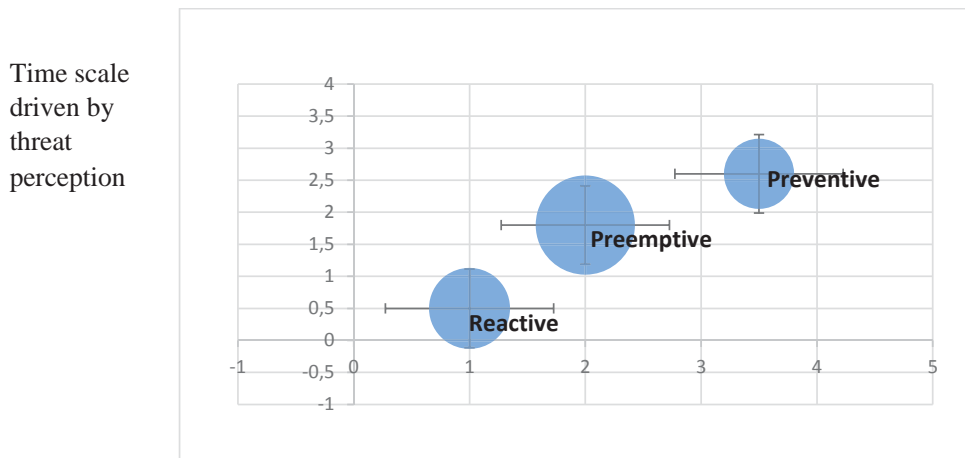
The first part of this article deals with the task of defining the precise role of the strategic culture as it is considered as the research-important intervening variable of military interventional precedents in the Middle East. The actual interventional decisions for this analytic approach are those undertaken by Western coalition partners. This approach is based on common grounds of policy formation, inherited by institutional defence initiatives. More than that, there is a common democratic tradition of forming Government and maintaining its accountability for security and defence initiatives.

Common democratic tradition and its role in fighting war is not a new attitude. Jeffrey Taliaferro previously put forward valuable ideas about how rational decision making affects courses of action as to whether a state should proceed with war initiatives (Taliaferro 2006, pp. 464-495). In this way, the militarised option of security policy is chosen as one of the possible decisions. The correlation of this decision to the grand strategy would be validated as a “war of necessity” (Dueck 2015, pp. 36-38). To the contrary, lack of political mobilisation for the cause of war would lead to diminished state-society relations as understanding a “war of choice” barely makes common sense (Echevarria 2014, pp. 23-25).

The initial difference between possible interpretations of war-initiating policy options suggests that the process of military interventional decisions is not a singular decision-making initiative. As Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne have defined in their poliheuristic-view based research, there is an intensive group-based decision dynamic that defines various possible inputs and outcomes of different decision bodies through the process (Mintz and Wayne 2016, pp.16-18). To follow a structured analytic effort through this chapter, theoretical assumptions are classified and are later incorporated into the decision-making model suggested by the neoclassical realist theorists. As far the military intervention decision model is concerned, attention is paid to the role of the strategic culture. It is considered as an important intervening variable that has multiple implications throughout the process.

## Defining the Intervention

Further enquiry should start with a clear definition of essential terms. In this case, the term *intervention* is defined as an act of political will to use military power to conduct reactive, preemptive or preventive measures in order to facilitate security concerns based on national or collective justification. This principal definition offers two important defining factors of intervention: the period of time to which the perceived threat is related, and the level of justification for the necessary intervention decision. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of the named defining factors that influence military interventional measures.



**Fig. 1. Military policy responses in relation to time and justification<sup>1</sup>**

The Fig. 1. illustrates the positioning of reactive (down left), preemptive (centre of the scale) and preventive (top right) military measures in conjunction with defining factors. These factors are established along vertical and horizontal lines. The vertical line depicts the time that is driven by threat perception. It follows arithmetic meanings from 0 to 1 as immediate threat, 1 – 2 as short period threat perception, 2 – 3 medium term threats, and meanings above 3 depict a long-term

<sup>1</sup> In the defined figure level of justification scale (horizontal axis) is defined by these marks of value: 1 – political elite; 2 – political-social coherence; 3 – Ad-hoc coalition based; 4 – International mandate based.

threat perception. On the other hand, the horizontal line suggests justification levels from the lowest one at political elite level to the international mandate-based one.

A closer look at those military measures and the decisions to implement them substantialises the research field of the neoclassical realist theory. On one hand, reactive initiatives to actions already performed by other agents or subnational groups is concerned as a reaction to system stimuli (Frowe 2017). According to Nicholas Kitchen, a representative of the theoretical approach, this might be the outcome of a limited conduct of security policy when operational ideas were not processed to executive institutions in an effective manner (Kitchen 2010, pp. 117-143). In this case, the term operational ideas is a significant contributor that broadens the research scope of the neoclassical realist theory. Operational ideas are based on classified perception of external processes from interventional areas and influential to rational choice calculations related to promoted interests and possible gains in the event of a military decision.

On the other hand, an early preventive initiative to counter security threats is usually concerned as an outcome of detailed security information that is available for a limited group of recipients. Processing of this information will initiate material resource-extraction capabilities during a decision process to use military power. In this process, as Jeffrey Taliaferro suggests, political will is affected as a direct implication of social and political mobilisation efforts for the cause of the campaign (Taliaferro 2006, pp. 464-495). In addition to that, Tomas Valasek has suggested that social and political mobilisation would succeed because of a properly planned and deliberately conducted public information campaign (Valasek 2011). All this leads to achieving the potential of operational ideas.

An additional distinctive factor of military intervention suggests that such an option can be conducted on a multiple scale of escalation. The scale of a military intervention's force escalation ranges from very limited and advisory involvement with proxy elements to full scale operational execution of a military campaign. Precedents conducted by Western countries in the Middle East through the last quarter of a century could highlight the spectrum of interventional initiatives force escalation. Establishment of direct CIA support links to Syrian fighter groups would be located on the lowest side of the interventional continuum. Going up the continuum of escalation, the contemporary Afghanistan campaign "Resolute Support" should be identified with the NATO-led military intervention in Libya

“Unified Protector” following somewhere near. The most escalated side of the continuum is occupied by operation “Inherent Resolve” in Iraq and Syria with the top position occupied by military intervention in Iraq in 2003, followed by the consequential surge stage.

Such an illustration of escalation continuum based on military intervention precedents in the Middle East suggests that there are multiple military power options chosen as policy responses. More than that, the definition of the intervention followed by descriptive factors highlight a potentially wide spectrum of dependent variables in terms of neoclassical realist theory (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, pp. 91-94). Any possible variation of military interventional decision is structured by the defined factors: time to threat perception driven by the elite’s images and previous experiences, and the level of justification empowered by the progress of decision-making coherence among domestic and international players. Despite these core factors, the choice of force escalation is provoked by material power capabilities, stated objectives and social mobilisation to support them.

All these named factors define possible policy choices. Proponents of the neoclassical realist theory are keen to define an extended range of dependent variables as policy options to use military tools in reaction to systemic stimuli (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, p. 31). This wide possibility of policy options indicates the complexity of decision making that involves perceptions of systemic stimuli, classification of differentiated factors, assessment of national interests and social-political mobilisation based on these interests. A further shift to discussion of more detailed assumptions of the neoclassical realist theory helps to define expanding analytic capabilities.

## **On assumptions of the theory**

According to the neoclassical realist approach, each interventional decision is a separate situation that is driven by multiple factors influencing security policy considerations. Decisions of military interventions in general are influenced by perception of threats or systemic stimuli. These perceptions lead to the socially constructed set-up of the structural environment. The structural environment is inherited from the structural realism. But in the neoclassical realist approach,



it defines a classifications-based attitude to external processes or interaction of agents. So, structural environment is defined through classification-based ideas and perceptions that are affected by leaders' images, institutional experience from previous military operations and the prioritised interest or proposed ideas regarding foreign policy (Rathbun 2008, pp. 294-321).

In terms of interventional analysis, the systemic environment is related to cognitive perception that leads to certain operational ideas based on rational choice decisions. This is a consequential two-step process driven by perception of external factors or processes followed by the dynamics of rational choice. Consequential trends of these two steps are highlighted through the lens of neoclassical realist theory by discussing the most common theoretical assumptions promoted through numerous works by the theory proponents. In addition to dominant blocks of external perception and internal decision-making assumptions, there is a third set of assumptions that defines inter-relating trends of previous blocks. These sets are illustrated in Table 1 which lists neoclassical realist assumptions defined in other significant works of developers of this theoretical approach<sup>2</sup>.

Assumptions of External Perception	Assumptions of Internal Decision Making
Cognitive perception is an essential factor for making sense of any systemic stimuli. Classification of external factors is based on priorities of interests and proposed ideas regarding external agents. Coalition initiatives are treated as the anticipated decision-making outcome.	Generating material power has a direct influence on interests. Political/ideological mobilisation drives aspiration for broader interests. Possibility of crisis escalation is relevant to the decreased value of interests and is the factor of rational choice.
Assumptions defining Inter-Relating Trends of External Perceptions and Internal Decision Dynamics	
Ideas are treated as information based on rationality and objectiveness about other external players or processes. Experience in the field of foreign and security policy affects assessments of systemic stimuli when developing interventional decisions. The final decision to act depends on interest analysis, political mobilisation and crisis escalation assessments. Strategic culture is widely influential in the mobilisation of ideas, assessments of interventional precedents and formulation of interests.	

**Table 1. Assumptions of the neoclassical realist theory<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> For the particular research value in the field of neoclassical realism development the author of this paper has referred to: Rose (1998), Legro and Moravcsik (1999), Kitchen (2010).

<sup>3</sup> The table has been created by the author in accordance with Snyder (1998), Kitchen (2012), Taliaferro (2006, 2016), Ripsman and Lobell (2016).

The first set of assumptions suggest that neoclassical realist approach is based on an understanding that analysis of the phenomena of foreign affairs should be started from the perception of the external environment (Rathbun 2008, p. 307). An objective evaluation of the phenomena of interest provides the possibility for a classification. The classification is driven by information that could be collected and processed. This is particularly important for the collective perception of external phenomena. That is evident in many works concerned with collective security initiatives and collective identification (Desch 2002, pp. 5-7). It appears to be true that coalition initiatives might serve as one of the key drivers in favour of deciding to conduct interventional foreign and security policy initiatives. This tendency has been highlighted by such researchers of behaviorism as Chris Alden and Amnon Aran (2012, pp. 62-65).

The second category of theoretical assumptions is related to internal decision-making dynamics. This set of assumptions focuses on material power, political and ideological mobilisation. It is true that these assumptions are related to the approach of traditional realism highlighting the importance of material power and consecutive interests (Taliaferro 2006, pp. 464-495). However, the assumption of possible crisis escalation defines complex settings of the decision making process. The possibility of crisis escalation might suggest the decreased justification for military policy decision. Decreased justification might limit the rational choice options of potential coalition formation. So, the interventional decision-making process is influenced by cognitive perceptions driven by pre-defined classification of external agents and processes (Rathbun 2008, pp. 300-301).

The third set of assumptions serves as the essential link between perception and assessment of external factors, and unit-level internal decision dynamics. This set of assumptions includes inter-relation of ideas, experiences, build-up of strategic culture and decisive points of internal rational-choice dynamics. These assumptions define a continuous relationship of how the interventional environment is perceived and processed as input into the unit level decision-making process. A more detailed and inter-relating view of these assumptions will help to define patterns of how military intervention decisions need to be researched.

The first assumption states that ideas are treated as information based on rationality and objectiveness about other external players and processes. Such definition of ideas should be associated with identification of political affiliations, selection

of objective data and classified agents of the external environment. Given the lack of a well-defined estimation of the information related to systemic stimuli, the best defining effort concerning ideas was made by Nicholas Kitchen who has named ideas as influential factors defined into scientific, normative and operational categories (Kitchen 2010, p. 129). The normative type of ideas is related to official governmental positions and international efforts for coping with threat challenges in defined geographical areas of intervention. The best example of interventional decisions based on normative ideas could be defined by policy implementations of liberal interventionists (Hoffman 2006, pp. 667-670). The operational type of ideas has multiple formats and connections to intervening variables. Domestic institutions are concerned as the information of a potential operational area is collected and assessed. For example, military and intelligence institutions can be named as producers and dispersers of operational ideas during processes of domestic decision making.

Otherwise, the assumption of experience highlights the important role of previous political decisions concerning conducted military campaigns. These are precedents that have a sound consequential effect for external threat perception and the internal decision-making process based on interest and risk analysis. Previous experience might enable two different but defining modes: a contributing factor enabling political communication or a backlash factor that cause distortion of efforts to mobilise popular support. The possibility of the backlash factor was clearly identified by President Obama's Administration back in 2013 once the decision to step back from military attacks against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria was taken (Goldberg 2016). On the other hand, a selected previous interventional experience can be promoted through the mass-media as the building factor of positive political communication (Lehmann 2009, pp. 5-48). Promotional communication cycles are aimed at social mobilisation and they are relevant to intervention campaigns that are planned and conducted throughout all levels of war: strategic, operational and tactical.

Strategic culture is closely related to strategic and operational levels of war. The term was initially defined by Jack Snyder referring to: "unique strategic culture related to security-military affairs that is a wider manifestation of public opinion, socialised into a distinctive mode of strategic thinking" (Zyla 2015, p. 106). Researching the strategic culture has brought some most exceptional approaches:

interpretivist, positivist and constructivist sides of exploring strategic culture and its relation to development of security-military affairs (Echevarria 2014, pp. 35-37).

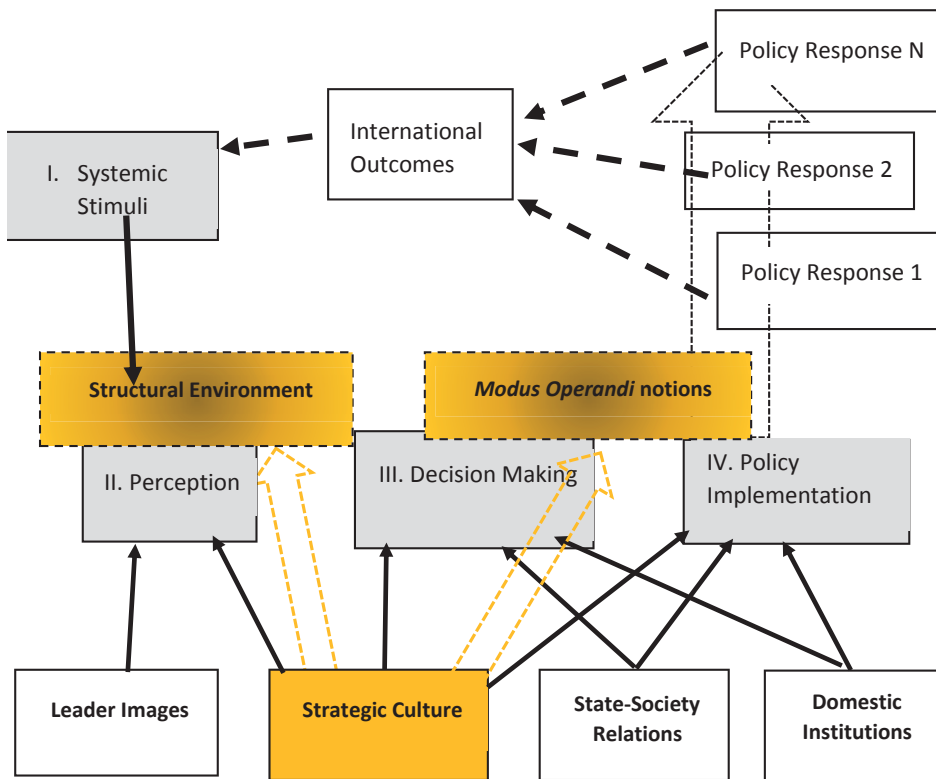
The positivist approach to the strategic culture was taken by supporters of the neoclassical realist theory. Scholars reached for falsifiable methodology to analyse security affairs decision making by states. Introduction of independent and intervening variables in state behaviour has been a solution promoted by multiple positivists prompting further discussions into which category of variables the strategic culture falls (Johnston 1995, pp. 34-42). This article suggests that strategic culture remains a significant intervening variable that has an impact for military decision rationale through the whole chain: from political level to strategic notions and operational decisions. In that case, it serves as a justification base of *modus operandi* – certain means of military conduct that concur with strategic aims and operational objectives of military campaigns. By this approach, the strategic culture is utilised to increase political and ideological mobilisation.

The categories of theoretical assumptions provided in this chapter define correlated links among neoclassical realist intervening variables. These links relate variables of the decision process that can affect psychological, societal, organisational models and suggest a certain approach to decision making related to military intervention. This approach suggests a highlighted role of strategic culture that stands-up as the widest and the most influential intervening variable able to influence internal and external dynamics as an interventional military campaign is planned and conducted.

## **Strategic Culture as Intervening Variable**

Intervening variables are considered a useful tool in research of security policy decisions. The tool has been applied to foreign policy analysis in the frame of the neoclassical realist theory. The neoclassical realist model of foreign policy decision analysis offers a two-step process: cognitive perception of systemic stimuli and development of rational choice options that lead to policy responses. Following the traditional Clausewitzian notion that war is an instrument of policy, as well as a continuation of political intercourse (Clausewitz 2006, pp. 41-44, 173-175), the theoretical model of foreign policy is applied to military interventional decisions.

The flow of military decision process dynamics starts from the perception of classified information as a reaction to external phenomena (Mintz and Wayne 2016, pp. 78-79). Despite the value and objectivity of the initial cognitive approach-based information, a rational choice workshop of decision-making is initiated in the search for possible solutions. In the case of military interventional decisions, these solutions will vary from reactive to preemptive measures with multiple force escalation scenarios. This flow of the military intervention decision cycle is depicted from the neoclassical realist model of foreign policy and illustrated in Figure 2. The bottom squares of the figure mark essential intervening variables represented by the theoretical approach (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, p. 34). It is worth mentioning that the intervening variable of strategic culture is exemplified by two vectors highlighting the adaptive rationality instigated by the perception of structural environment and *modus operandi* notions. Those vectors of adaptive rationality will be discussed later on.



**Fig. 2. Role of strategic culture intervening variable in the neoclassical realist model of military intervention decision cycle (adapted from Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, p. 59)**

This figure suggests that strategic culture stands as a significant intervening variable able to generate multiple impacts during the decision-making and policy implementation steps. Despite various definitions of the strategic culture, the military intervention decision-making model supports the argument that strategic culture is compatible with notions of process rationality and adaptive rationality (Johnston 1995, p. 34). The process rationality was recently illustrated by Colin Dueck in his book *The Obama Doctrine* where he has suggested a detailed list of preferable options as the previous U.S President's Administration comprehended strategy of foreign policy (Dueck 2015, pp. 17-23, 33-39). An adaptive rationality is associated with historical precedents in interventional regions. These factors lead to assessments of a particular structural environment and have an impact on preferable policy options when dealing with security concerns there.

Given the previous sets of theoretical assumptions, choice of policy options in the frame of the neoclassical realist approach is correlated with justification and political-social mobilisation. In the neoclassical realist approach, the strategic culture is considered as an intervening variable that influences how states define their objectives of war and what means they choose to wage military campaigns. That is the vector of *modus operandi* notions defined in the figure above. This vector of the strategic culture has a weight on the domestic domain of interventional decision-making as it might empower political communication and social mobilisation for the cause of war. In contrast, it can also enable restrictions for interventional campaign due to various political, legal, social or military factors. This is a wide set of influential factors that is not homogenic. Additional intervening variables of state-society relations and domestic institutions have their ties to the process as well.

Another vector of the strategic culture points towards a structural environment. The understanding of it defines important notions of how processes or events in potential interventional areas are perceived. To paraphrase Nicholas Kitchen's variation of operational ideas, assessment of the structural environment suggests the context in which operational ideas might rise as particular perceptions (Kitchen 2010, pp.129-131)<sup>4</sup>. Application of this vector to the Middle East suggests

4 Context meaning was not originally declared by the named scholar. The development of structural environment ideas follows the original input by Nicholas Kitchen regarding perception of differentiated information of external processes. For more on classified ideas and perception see: Kitchen (2010, pp. 129-131).

that a reliance on military options as the policy response to alleged threats in the region is associated with the framing of strategic culture as well. This is because the implemented foreign policy options define precedents. And precedents influence social-political relations. More than that, military involvement in operational areas develops appraisals and sets of notions based on experiences (Mintz and Wayne 2016, pp. 97-103). In this way, experiences gradually initiate classifications of external players and definition of various processes. This is the illustration of how strategic culture shifts in accordance with implications of adaptive rationality.

To sum up, the neoclassical realist foreign policy model applied to the military intervention decision cycle emphasises that the intervening variable of the strategic is influenced by a cognitive approach to the structural environment. The process is driven by continuous perception of external factors from potential interventional areas. The implication of how external factors are classified and operational information about them is processed in the internal decision cycle, advocates that this is the adaptive intervening variable. More than that, the *modus operandi* is another vector of rational adaptation that represents military conduct adapted to attitudes and patterns of behaviour when “solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force” (Boot 1990, p. 121).

This part of the article defined the detailed role of the strategic culture as the changing intervening variable that effects perception of the structural environment and patterns of military conduct through the foreign policy model applied to the military intervention decision cycle. The following chapter shifts attention to empirical circumstances of the Middle East and the causal relations of these circumstances to the genesis of operational ideas that lead to changes of strategic culture through defined vectors of adaptive rationality. In this way, the empirical part of the strategic culture’s inferences is discussed through changing perceptions of the contemporary Middle East and the complexity of military conduct in modern war precedents.



## Strategic Culture and Its Empirics of Adaptive Rationality

The suggested Figure 2 illustrated the role of strategic culture as the intervening variable within the frame of the neoclassical realist theory. More than that, this intervening variable is not a stable one. Based on previous perspective, cultural attitude to strategic considerations and warfare notions has been an increasingly popular research subject since Jack Snyder analysed the topic in his monograph in 1977 (Snyder 1997). Since then, the strategic culture has gained multiple definitions consistent with many variables: geography, climate, natural resources, organisation, traditions, historical practices, political structures, ideology, myths, symbols, generational change, and technology (Echevarria 2014, p. 34). This ample defining variety is not relevant to contemporary challenges of applied military practice. The intervening variable of strategic culture serves the purpose of further analysis of interventional military campaigns when it is applied through previously defined vectors of adaptive rationality: assessments of structural environment and changing notions of *modus operandi*.

Perception and assessments of structural environment are empirically related to the traditional understanding of strategy. By General Moltke's traditional understanding, the strategy is more than a disciplined body of concepts, it is also the ad-hoc practice of adapting those concepts to changing circumstances (Hughes 1993, Echevarria 2014). The adaptation part of the strategy is influenced by certain cultural norms and values that incorporate cognitive elements, societal relations and institutional dynamics. For that part of the strategic culture's considerations is served by an academic discussion of how systemic stimuli are perceived and dealt with in military intervention campaigns.

The second vector of adaptive rationality is evident in contemporary operational practices in the Middle East, an area where coalition players have been able to promote military capabilities, even though not always willing to do this in a robust manner (Michaels 2014, p. 19). That environment and its challenges of complexity are discussed as empirical bases for adaptation of military conduct in contemporary interventional campaigns.

There is a practice of how strategic thinking is adapting to changing circumstances in the contemporary Middle East. It is assessed in this chapter with the help of



previously defined vectors of adaptive rationality. Firstly, practical evaluation of shifting perceptions of the structural environment provide a fundamental understanding of how neoclassical realist theory understands patterns of the international system applied to potential operational areas (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, pp. 36-38). The role of modern warfare as the tool for implementing political effects will be discussed later. This path gradually leads to the definition of contemporary *modus operandi* in the Middle East that needs to be accounted for as interventional decisions are planned and implemented.

## Shifting Perceptions After the Arab Spring

The defining milestone of the contemporary Middle East is related to the beginning of the Arab Spring. This was the period of multiple civil protests that rapidly spread from the first civil disturbance in Tunisia to numerous countries in the region. To paraphrase Steven Cook, this is a continuous period of protest and violence that has introduced a growing level of cruelty instead of initially promising democratic changes (Cook 2017, pp. 7-11). The true factor is, as the author suggests, that democratic progress has not developed within societies facing multiple power-broking defenders. Events during this period suggest some important observations that define how the perception of a region's structural environment is forming-up. Based on several important accounts of social development and security concerns in the region, the essential classification factors that affect perceptions of systemic stimuli are: political power-broking gravity; capabilities of opposing agents to existing regimes, and level of societal fragmentation<sup>5</sup>.

The named factors are relevant to the assessments of democratic tendencies throughout the region. As Theda Skocpol has stated, revolution requires simultaneous mutually reinforcing transformations of political and social structures (Skocpol 2015). Transformation of these structures is important as it

<sup>5</sup> This classification is based on insights provided by multiple researchers who worked on theory of revolution, the phenomena of Arab Spring and implications of social disturbances throughout the Middle East. For more refer to: Miller, Martini, Larrabee, *et al* (2012), Skocpol (2015, pp. 3-38), Cook (2017, pp. 142-148).

enforces the classification of a political regime and power gravity within it. This classification leads to a definition of the permissive or restrictive environment for a possible interventional campaign. As the war option is another tool of policy, adversary power structure and political gravity in the operational area are some of the core factors that need to be assessed before this option is promoted. Objective assessments are influenced by multiple operational experiences and perceptions of societal fragmentation. An important example of this process is the consolidation phase of the campaign "Iraqi Freedom" that suggests how strategy could become wrong without detailed evaluation of power gravity and diversification of local groups (Gordon and Trainor 2006).

On the other hand, societal fragmentation needs to be compared with the capabilities of opposing agents to confront governing regimes. Broken Libyan fighter fractions and influential operatives of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt can be named as two opposing examples in that instance. The latter was able to take power-broking strings in Egypt as post-Qaddafi Libya rapidly felt into decentralised pieces. This comparison suggests that the societal division and impact capabilities of opposing agents become important factors of crisis escalation assessments during the military intervention decision process.

Given historical precedents suggest that military operational experience has a continuous impact on how interventional campaigns are planned and conducted. The Arab Spring was followed by interventional decisions on Libya, Syria and Iraq by the U.S.-led coalitions. These precedents will be discussed through the classification of the structural environment applied for each case.

The case of Libyan intervention was initiated soon after social disturbances had spread through the region and had an effect on follow-on military decisions. Prior to the intervention, Libya was a centralised authoritarian regime with hierarchical power broking gravity concentrated in the leader's institution. More than that, any capabilities of opposing elements were degraded through the implementation of an autocratic rule system based on tribal hierarchy and selective beneficial roles of regime followers (Cook 2017, pp. 75-78). Prior to the Arab Spring, societal division in the country was considered as a limited factor for possible impact to change the status-quo. This assessment was one of the initial operational ideas circulating among the international community before the Libyan crisis (Chivvis 2015, pp. 14-16). The truth is that intelligence activity on the Qaddafi state was

down-graded ever since the regime had refused nuclear capability development. That is why active opposition to the regime in Tripoli and Qaddafi's technological defence capabilities were initial grey zones, as the interventional campaign was rapidly planned (Lambeth 2017, pp. 171-179).

The Syrian conflict is another consecutive example that follows a quick time line in the development of civil war. The structural environment of this conflict was much better perceived by Western countries as the Syrian case had been under continuous intelligence surveillance by different states (Quintana and Eyal 2015). The leading perception at the beginning of Syrian civil disturbances was that Bashar al-Assad's regime, strongly supported by the Alawite minority, had continuous support from Iran. This made the regime quite strong and concentrated in power-broking entities. As the rapid process of social disturbance showed, the Syrian population had a significant level of societal fragmentation to enable it to mobilise a critical mass of opposing groups. But the capabilities of the opposing groups for fighting the Assad's regime supported by Iran and its Hezbollah proxies were assessed in modest terms. President Obama clearly defined the initial situation of the Syrian conflict: "and they are fighting against a farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil conflict" (Goldberg 2016).

As the Syrian conflict was dragging into its fourth year of continuous atrocities, the split of territorial entities and rise of diversified ethnic and religious groups took a more common ground. These rifts were not happening in a vacuum. A strong mutual impact of decline came across the border from Iraq, the country that the U.S. and coalition forces had disengaged from in 2011 with a reserved hope for a better self-sustainable future. None of these hopes materialised as Iraq felt again into political rivalry, social-religious fragmentation and deterioration of armed force. The power vacuum throughout vast regions of Iraq and Syria has been exploited by religious extremists claiming super-national identity and jihadi ideological affiliation worldwide (McCants 2015, pp. 121-124). As the jihadi group named Islamic State seized Mosul, the social and economic centre of gravity shifted in northern Iraq and the reactive military measures got rapid support from the U.S.-led coalition. Nevertheless, the coalition of the willing to counter ISIS was marked by regional tensions resulting in a clash of national interests and the questionable capabilities of local fighters (Kagan et al. 2016).

These intense shifts in the Middle East happened in quite a rapid time frame. Despite illustrating the vulnerability of the restrained power-broking gravity of official regimes and widening societal fragmentation through the region, these precedents also highlighted the gradual shift towards a more restrictive structural environment for militarised foreign interventions. Since the Arab Spring, any scaled military interventional decision has become a subject to the complex localised environment and regional partnership difficulties. As the recent precedents of Libyan and Syrian conflicts dictate, militarised options would require deep knowledge of the society for whose fate military intervention would take the responsibility. Additionally, there is a great need for a sustained military presence to provide security for the population and infrastructure. This was evident after the U.S.-led coalition's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, followed by the rise of Islamic State in vast regions of the country.

More than the above, recent regional tensions suggest that there is more difficulty in alienating regional clients, and indeed committed allies to maintain stability through the region. The revoked supportive cooperation with the Iraqi government and ongoing "Resolute Support" mission in Afghanistan can reveal some of the strongest clients of sustained regional stability. Regional stability initiatives are built on prolonged military campaigns that are shaped by operational ideas perceived from areas of interest. The "Iraqi Freedom" campaign's initial phase was based on the idea "smaller is beautiful" (Gordon and Trainor 2006, pp. 38-50). Eventually, that approach did not end well for its strategic aims. Intervention in Libya was driven by the political idea "leading from behind" (Dueck 2015, p. 82). The same factor was considered to have caused limitations for the non-interventional decision by Washington during initial phases of the Syrian conflict. These examples suggest that operational ideas have become more restrained. In other words, if initial perception of systemic stimuli from the Middle East is based on selective engagement and dictates limited power options, accounted operational ideas take the same pattern and become focused on drawback factors among regional clients and allies. In these circumstances, a militarised option of foreign policy still needs to be considered.

Thus, Middle Eastern security policy is exaggerated by splits between restrained operational ideas and normative ideas that traditionally promote liberal interventionism. That rift has implied continuous tensions between "war of

necessity” and “war of choice” notions that effected state-society relations. Thus, more demanding circumstances for the political elite to consider any option of militarised intervention are created (Connaughton 2008, pp. 4-8). In the words of Professor Michael Clarke, the margin for error for Western leaders is quite narrow and will be much smaller in the future<sup>6</sup>. This margin for error stands for internal decision-making dynamics and operational conduct of military campaigns as well. The former factor is closely related to other intervening variables of the neoclassical realist decision-making model discussed previously. The later factor enforces changes of *modus operandi* that influence Western strategic culture.

As history continues to spiral, so the quest for regional perceptions from the Middle East is shifting towards assessment of fragmented local groups that shape the essential structural environment of potential interventional areas. Libyan fractured groups have not been accounted for, Syrian fighters were degraded, and ethnically alienated players in Iraq have been selectively enforced by the U.S.-led coalition initiatives (Sky 2017). These are the tendencies of how operational ideas from the interventional campaign of “Odyssey Dawn” and “Unified Protector” in Libya and “Inherent Resolve” of contemporary Iraq and Syria have been perceived. More than that, contemporary warfare precedents from the Middle East indicate that the environment of modern warfare has become even more intricate. Strategic thinking of annihilation or deterrence based on maneuver and fire power have dominated the XX century. Contemporary warfare has been changed by thoughts of decapitation and attrition based on precise strike, global reach, special force capabilities and psychological operations. These changes in modern warfare are discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

## Complexity of Modern Warfare

The previous chapter looked at the fracturing role between normative and restrained operational ideas that affect military interventional decisions due to

<sup>6</sup> Prof. Michael Clarke’s lecture “Combat Airpower and Political Effect”, delivered at multinational conference “Airpower and National Security”, Riga, Latvian National Defense Academy, 9 March 2018.

the cognitive perception of the structural environment. This path will be followed further into operational challenges of interventional campaigns, as modern warfare's role in achieving political effects will be discussed.

Clausewitz claimed that scientific method of analysing war is relevant because it is the fundamentals of operational science that are the reason, as "innovation and adaptation can occur in wars" (Clausewitz 2006, p. 173). More than that, this article claims that the operational science is implied by strategic art providing cognitive cores to apply a military option as another set of political means. Previous empirical examples from the Middle East highlighted that a restrictive structural environment shows the increased responsibility of the political elite for mismanaging military options. Hence, the modern war fighting capability becomes a significant and very responsible option. This brings the necessity to reveal the complexity of modern warfare that is relevant through two magnitudes: the strategic context of conducting military intervention and challenges of operational environment.

The first magnitude of complexity is associated with the strategic context of decisions for conducting military intervention. Following the introduced assumptions of neoclassical realism, the decision is promoted as an acceptable policy response once multiple cost and benefit assessments are done. In other words, a militarised response to systemic stimuli is the option that is rationally beneficial in political and social terms. This pattern of rational choice is promoted through the internal decision-making cycle. In addition, the preferred form of military power utilisation is influenced by perceptions of the structural environment and operational ideas that are formed in relation to this environment. The best example of this matter is depicted by the reaction to the Syrian conflict escalation quite soon after the Libyan operation was conducted. Permissive or restrictive assessments of utilising a military response, in this instance, were based on capabilities for alienating local groups and international partners for the preventive response (Mintz and Wayne 2016, pp.143-144).

Important experiences of complex strategic context are drawn from land-centric counterinsurgency operations. An occupying force cannot seize control on its own for too long. As precedents suggest, this one-sided conduct risks opposition to a newly-installed government and unites adversary groups sparking a potential crisis (Galula 1964, pp. 62-64). Possible solutions in this matter allow little room

for error in the decision to deploy an interventional force regarding multinational support, interoperability and assistance to local power-broking groups. Dealing with these groups on the ground and building assistance capabilities for selected players provides additional challenges on the operational as well as tactical level (Barr and Mintz 2016). This set of challenges is defined at operational-tactical level and covers the essential part of war fighting developments of interventional campaigns.

A contemporary version of Clausewitz's operational science related to military experience in the Middle East is illustrated by the Afghan saying: "If water is muddied downstream, don't waste your time filtering it; better to go upstream" (Sadat and McCrystal 2017, p. 7). There are seldom precedents when interventional forces have been wading through the "muddy stream". On the contrary, numerous interventional precedents in the Middle East illustrate this saying: the U.S. Special Forces reached into Syria in pursuit of al-Qaeda operatives during the occupation of Iraq, and mountain crossings into Pakistan have become a vast hunting area for Taliban-affiliated fighters (Sadat and McCrystal 2017). What is essential is that in each case, the complexities were huge. They are identified in three important domains: social, geographical and tactical.

The social domain is related to perception of the interventional environment through the socially constructed approach. It is formed by prejudices as an influential factor mixed with armed force assistance experiences, local governing capabilities and social fragmentation. Multiple coalition forces have gone through these experiences enforcing a change of attitudes from war fighting to an advice and assistance role for security sustainment (Rynning 2013, pp. 83-104). The importance of this domain could be evaluated by considering Bernard Lewis' thesis: "There is enough in the traditional culture of Islam on the one hand and the modern experience of the Muslim peoples on the other to provide the basis for an advance toward freedom in the true sense of that word" (Lewis 2011, p. 173). But the limited results of the Arab Spring demonstrate that the desired synergy of political and social transformation are far from complete. Restrained operational ideas from recent interventional precedents suggest a shift from religious extremism and definitions of adversary cultural features towards societal fragmentation and power gravity. This understanding is an important step towards at least constructing a restrained permissive environment in the region.



Restrained permissiveness causes selective cooperation with enabling local forces as operations “Inherent Resolve” and “Resolute Support” showed in recent years (Quintana and Eyal 2015).

The geographic domain of complexity is an immense one, with the inclusion of geographical boundaries, natural obstacles or climate features, and different adversary conduct in urban and rural areas. The vast complexity of adversary structure and the fighting environment was an essential limiting factor during the intervention in Somalia, as the demanding climate, different centres of gravity in urban areas and natural limitations for movement formed a set of important challenges (Connaughton 2008, pp. 161-164). The same domain played out again as the coalition forces of the “Inherent Resolve” operation began hunting and neutralising ISIS elements through vast deserted areas of contemporary Iraq and Syria.

Finally, the tactical domain of complexity is associated with application of mission command in modern warfare. This principle is based on the flexibility to implement designated missions with centralised control but decentralised execution. Mission command role was strongly advocated by Carl von Clausewitz and mastered by the German Reich during Blitzkrieg campaigns (Connaughton 2008, p. 4). But, the last time the Western coalition applied a large scale offensive maneuver was during the attack on Baghdad in 2003 (Gordon and Trainor 2006, pp. 38-50). Some might argue that the latest precedent was set during the Mosul liberation operation in Iraq. The truth is that the “Inherent Resolve” campaign provides an example of how the politically stated “leading from behind” idea is now fully applied to tactical level in the interventional campaign in the Middle East (Lambeth 2017). Modern technology, precise munitions and continuous surveillance provide expanded warfare capabilities. Integration of these capabilities with local force structures through assistance initiatives and combined control structures suggest another level of complexity at tactical domain level. This latest campaign in the Middle East illustrates the changing face of modern warfare: integration of new weapon technologies and increased cooperation with selective local entities provides grounds for mixed tactical and social complexity.

To sum up, this overview of modern warfare has illustrated some important implications from campaigns in the Middle East. Military interventional precedents in the region are affected by various complexities. Complexities mean the increased role of pragmatic operational ideas over normative justifications



of military interventions. These are empirical considerations of the intervening variable of the strategic culture. They suggest that the shift of cognitive perception and changing modus operandi of modern warfare in the region are causal effects that rise from operational to strategic level as operational experiences dictate the necessity to adjust to complexities of contemporary warfare challenges.

## Conclusions

This article highlighted how recent interventions conducted by Western countries in the Middle East have been changing the understanding of strategic culture. The notion of strategic culture has been an interesting research topic since the Cold War. The idea of strategic culture has maintained its certain academic inertia as the structural environment has been changing ever since the 1990s. The aim of the article is to define practical implications of the pronounced intervening variable of strategic culture through the prism of the neoclassical realist theory. More than that, these practical implications are driven by recent interventional initiatives in the Middle East, as military operations conducted since the Arab Spring process affected the region in 2011.

This is an important period of political and social development throughout the region of interest. The relevant importance of the period is reflected in the highlighted role of fragmented societies that influence the shifting gravity of political stability. Fragmented societies, whether able to shift political control into the hands of new governmental bodies or not, play an essential role in contemporary assessments of interventional areas: from Tripoli to Baghdad or Kabul. All active or potential interventional areas have the dimension of human terrain that needs to be accounted for. As this research of strategic culture suggests, localised gravity and sub-structured environment is the lowest level that reveals initial impacts for changes of strategic culture. Conditions and causal effects of these changes need to be clarified as final concluding remarks.

Firstly, strategic culture has different definitions and various levels of understanding that range from elements of domestic decision-making group dynamics to the promotion vessel of military aims among coalition members. Proponents of neoclassical realist theory have defined strategic culture as a permissive or

restrictive intervening variable, applicable for foreign policy research. This type of intervening variable serves for both: domestic decision-making implications and assessments of coalition forming initiatives. On top of this, the article suggests that changes of strategic culture in the continuum of restrictive-permissive level are driven by perceptions of structural environment.

Secondly, these perceptions are formed through security policy experiences, social, cultural and anthropological prejudices. Such tendencies are related to the discussed theoretical assumptions of the neoclassical realist theory. Assumptions defining inter-relating trends between the perception of structural environment and internal decision-making cycle have revealed a potential combined research of causal changes affected by the strategic culture. In that case, there are two important elements of the neoclassical realist assumptions: strategic culture and operational ideas. Synergy between them suggests that Western strategic culture is a changing notion. It has two vectors of changes: through implied inputs to the structural environment and the generalised conception of *modus operandi*. The former vector defines possible inputs through security policy experiences and a spread of different ideas as military options are developed. The later vector suggests organisational culture and adaptation of military enablers to achieve the required aims of interventional security policy initiatives.

Thirdly, the adaptation of military enablers refers to a broad scope of war fighting functions that are faced with the complexities of the contemporary Middle East. These complexities are evident at the operational level of warfare. Operational experiences suggest changing perceptions of local phenomena. In general terms, this leads to generated operational ideas of how to deal with certain security threats or challenges in the defined region. In this way, the research suggests that the initial conception of Nicholas Kitchen's operational ideas occupy an intervening role in between perception of different domains of modern warfare: complexity and reactive operational initiatives and how to deal with them. This process also defines the *modus operandi*.

To sum up, the article supports a broader notion of strategic culture that is formed by entrenched world views, sets of competitive ideas, shared expectations by society and preferences of material capabilities distribution. These vast elements of the strategic culture are provoked by interventional experiences that shape perception of the structural environment and dictate preferences for the

power scale of interventional decisions as a reaction to systemic stimuli. Out of this, a common level of the permissiveness of the structural environment is defined. The permissiveness is associated with capabilities for implementing political objectives without further military power escalation. Once the systemic environment becomes more permissive, the possibility of activating military intervention at various force-escalation levels becomes more possible.

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