Until recently, the question of culture has not attracted any attention in international security studies. The earliest definition though a restricted one, was from Jack Snyder who defined strategic culture as "the body of attitudes and beliefs that guides and circumscribes thought on strategic questions, influences the way strategic issues are formulated, and sets the vocabulary and perceptual parameters of strategic debate." This definition has since undergone many changes. Johnston himself gives a long definition of strategic culture as consisting of two parts. One consists of basic assumptions about the role of war in human affairs, nature of adversaries, threats posed and conditions under which force is used. The second part is the assumption at the operational level-what strategic options are efficacious for dealing with the threat environment? The simplest way to look at strategic culture in our view would be, as in the case of China whether a long history and continual culture could be critical sources to determine strategic behaviour of a nation.
China with its historical and cultural continuity and the "crucial role of precedent in intellectual and policy life," was and continues to be an ideal country to study strategic culture and its influence in policy making. For his research, the writer Alastair Iain Johnston was right in choosing China and within the long period of Chinese history, the Ming period (1368-1644) to study the trends in strategic culture and grand strategy preferences, where the decision makers were aware of the philosophical and textual traditions out of which strategic culture arose. Added to these was the availability of innumerable literature in Chinese on military strategy.

The author chose the well known "Seven Military Classics" starting from Sun I Bing Fa in the fifth century B.C. and ending with the Tang Tai Zong Li Wei Gong Wen Dui written sometime in the tenth century A.D. for his critical analysis. These classics were examined on the basis of three interrelated questions -

1. The role of war in human affairs.
2. The nature of the adversary.
3. The efficacy of military force and applied violence.

These texts accept that "warfare and conflict are relatively constant features of interstate affairs, that the conflict with an enemy tends toward zero sum stakes and consequently that violence is a highly efficacious means for dealing with conflict." Use of coercive force was thought to be the most efficacious means of deterring and defeating threats to security.

This conclusion together with military capability and effective destruction of the enemy which the author calls parabellum stands in contrast to the common image of Chinese strategic thought of Confucian-Mencian paradigm which assumes that conflict is avoidable and if necessitated being used minimally for the restoration of moral political order.

In about three hundred years of Ming rule, the major concern of Ming decision makers was the security problem posed by the Mongols in the north which far outweighed the uprisings and rebellions along China's southern and south western borders. The Ming dynasty was involved in 308 external wars throughout their period of which 62 percent was with the Mongols. A constant theme in the more important texts relating to strategy and various memorials issued by the military commanders and specialists in the Ming period relates to their continuing effort to keep the northern borders secure from the Mongols. A common feature in all the Ming perceptions of the Mongol threat was the zero sum nature of approach rather than the Confucian-Mencian references. The enemy was despised. They were uniformly described as "sub-human"- dogs and sheep. The conflict with the northern "barbarians" was a constant security theme throughout the Ming period.

If there was a period of departure from zero sum approach, it was only a temporary measure when the capacity to act offensively by Ming was low, but soon it reverted to a coercive approach when they were able to mobilize resources or when the capacity of the Mongols to threaten the Ming rulers was low. Where the resources were inadequate, static defence and accommodation were thought of as best strategy for a particular situation, but as soon the Ming gained strength, they tended to act offensively against this threat. The researcher makes a convincing model that the approach of Mings towards strategy and strategic preferences were not in conformity with the Confucian-Mencian paradigm with the
latter laying more emphasis on accommodation.

Most of the contemporary scholarship on China have tended to emphasise on the Confucian-Mencian ideational model of traditional Chinese strategic thought, but ignoring the parabellum features that run continuously in Chinese strategic literature. While many analysts tended to describe Mao's strategy as one borrowed from Sun Zi or of some kind of relationship between the two, the researcher convincingly argues that the only point where Mao has borrowed from Sun Zi was the notion of absolute flexibility. One typical example could be "avoiding the enemy when it is stronger and attacking if and when it weakens, as also use of deception for displaying a false form."

Since liberation when Mao until his death held monopoly over strategic decisions, there is some evidence of the continuing influence of parabellum strategic culture on Chinese security policy.

Certain conclusions made by Johnston are of relevance to Indian analysts. These are:

* A study of 12 foreign policy crises in which PRC was involved, it resorted to violence in 9 cases (75%) including the Sino Vietnamese naval clashes in Spratlys in 1988. This is proportionately far more than the other major powers in the twentieth century - USA, USSR and Britain whose comparable figures were 18%, 27% and 12% respectively. The researchers quoted in the book, described violence as of "high intensity," "involving serious clashes," or "full scale war." The use of force occurred when the Chinese leaders perceived the issues as high value and zero sum.

* China was far more likely to use violence in a dispute over military security questions such as territory. To quote figures from the book, China used violence as a key conflict-management technique in 80% of the crises in which the primary issue was territory or related to territorial security. The author concludes from the study that the "Chinese decision makers tended to see territorial disputes as high value conflicts, due in part to a historical sensitivity to threats to the territorial integrity of the state."(a point to be noted by Indian analysts)

* More surprising, the Chinese tended to establish a very low threshold to determine what constituted a clear threat to the security of the state. A tendency to define even political/diplomatic crises as high threat demanding a legitimate response by violence was noticed.

* A study of the Korean war, Quemoy-Matsu attack, clashes with USSR and Chinese invasion of Vietnam, indicates that the Chinese tended to act in a more conflictual manner as it gets relatively stronger.
A case was made out by Alan Whitefield in his book on the Chinese intervention in Korean war as one of "defensive deterrence." This certainly cannot be said in the case of Chinese invasion of Vietnam and its projection of power even recently, as in Mischief reef as one of pure "defensive deterrence." The writer makes no mention of the border war with India as this itself will be a major study for the Indian analysts in terms of strategic culture (We ignore here, the highly biased account of Alan Whitefield on this subject).

The book and the results made out may not be acceptable to some strategic analysts who consider that China could do no harm to India. But the tools used and methodology followed by the writer are worth looking into for making a study of India's own strategic culture. In the last one year, and more often after the Pokhran II tests, one frequently hears of a lack of "strategic culture" in India. For a student of history questions like- why we allowed foreign forces to come right upto Panipet, the heartland of India without engaging them at the point of entry itself; even recently in the border war with the Chinese, why did we not use the airforce to our advantage; or in the 1971 war of liberation of Bangladesh, why did India return the territory retaining the prisoners for a while (when it should have been the other way), could all be studied in detail using the same tools for an intensive study.

This perhaps could be done by the "assembly of wise men" (the Advisory group of the National Security Council) who in their five star comfort could help in "defending India" better.

S.Chandrasekharan 8-2-1999

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