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Risk Assessment in Encounters between Culture and Security [1]

Since at least the late 2000s, I have been observing – sometimes organizing, and sometimes participating in – diverse forums featuring different combinations of politicos, policy decision-makers, academics, and applied practitioners, which have broached the relationship between "culture" and "security," sometimes in overlapping but often in notably different ways. At times, the purpose is to ascertain how new cultural developments might disrupt established security goals. At other moments, it is the other way around, with an emphasis upon ways new security priorities are driving cultural interventions. A previously obscure term – cultural security – is now in much wider use, even if it means different things to different people.

I am not alone. In 2009 the Aspen Institute put together a big-name event 📄 also dedicated to "culture and security." In 2010 the National Intelligence Council hosted a meeting on the topic of "cultural diplomacy and security." In 2011 the National Humanities Alliance sponsored an event addressing "national security and other global challenges through cultural understanding" at the Capitol Visitor Center. Also in 2011, the Wilson Center hosted a conference to promote interagency conversation on "culture in the military." Early this year, Georgetown University hosted a Chatham House event on "cultural dialogue in East Asian security." This past June in D.C., the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy hosted a "global dialogue about cultural diplomacy, national security and global risks." And so on.

Below the surface of these frequent forums are multiple ongoing initiatives across the securityscape – and periodic efforts to organize them – for enhancing cultural capacity or for identifying key cultural factors of conflict. But beyond the U.S. military's well-documented cultural turn, something more is percolating here. Less observed are the effects of a preoccupation with security upon the agendas of civilian cultural agencies, non-traditional participants in security policy and practice.

We could describe this as two simultaneous trends: the securitization of culture and the enculturation of security. The first comprises attention by national security agencies in the U.S. and elsewhere to culture as one potential source of insecurity; in the process re-conceptualizing it in ways consistent with a security-centric worldview. This trend includes groups and countries that perceive the security of their own cultures as under constant existential threat. The second trend includes ways that culture, as a resource, has been applied in many different ways as a part of solutions to diverse problems of security. Often, it seems, security agencies promote the first trend while non-security actors respond by bolstering the second.

One arena in which the term – cultural security – has gained a foothold is in discussions of the strategic importance of preserving artworks, monuments, archaeological sites and artifacts when considering the implications for international affairs of the international art market, the antiquities trade, and the illegal looting or destruction of art and artifacts. This attention

includes greater recognition by the U.S. military of the strategic value of capacity-building in heritage training, protection, and preservation, as a force multiplier 📄, incorporated into stability operations, and in collaboration with civilian partners.

Efforts of heritage planning—emergency preparedness and response—also regularly coalesce in terms of the push and pull around "cultural property," as increasingly defined by international law, as a basis of calls for repatriation, as a politicized resource of community or national identity, and as a source of conflict or its mitigation. If the historian David Lowenthal condemns the proliferation of these "heritage wars," such developments indicate how cultural identity and related questions are now subject to an ongoing global process of securitization.

Reference to cultural security also points to distinct or diverging national security policies. If the term is not a part of the U.S.'s domestic security lexicon, it figures significantly in China's. A search in Google Scholar for [cultural security + China] generated over 1,500 hits since the early 2000s, demonstrating a lively scholarly cottage industry in China around its cultural security. China's approach to cultural security is often embodied in concepts from the Chinese martial arts, or wushu 📄, which is regularly extolled as a resource for "safeguarding national cultural security."

In 2011, the Central Committee of China's Communist Party approved a decision to further develop the country's cultural industry, improve citizens' confidence in Chinese culture, and enhance its soft power, all understood as parts of the effort to protect China's national "cultural security." And earlier this year, President Hu Jintao made the case for China to bolster its cultural security and to "strengthen its cultural production to defend against the West's assault on the country's culture and ideology." China's Ministry of Culture includes Lady Gaga on a growing list of songs that cannot be legally downloaded because they "endanger national cultural security." For China, cultural security is a national policy issue in ways it is not in the U.S.

If China's government understands its national identity through a cultural security framework, one recent trend in international affairs has been to consider the sources of difficulties in multilateral cooperation to be, in significant part, cultural. As the conventional wisdom holds, particular national cultures lead to distinct policy worldviews which, in turn, inform differing assumptions underlying security goals. New joint efforts, therefore, encourage "cultural dialogue in international security" as a way to act internationally while not thinking universally, and to head off a "clash of values" provoked by "contrasting cultural approaches to security." Other projects 📄 seek to be low-profile platforms promoting "strategic listening" and cooperative research on non-traditional threats – including the increased "securitization of identity" – by exploring the multiple ways culture can be "an important dimension of human security."

Public agencies and non-profits in the U.S. active in "culture and the arts" – traditionally not so concerned with national security policies – now regularly consider what constructive role they too might play in the universe of possibilities presented when culture is brought to bear on problems of security and vice-versa. But it is not clear if there is such a role.

Safeguarding cultural property, cultural diplomacy, and the building of international applied humanities partnerships are three activities we might point to. But future cultural diplomacy efforts addressing the priorities of the security state would do well to consider how those priorities often problematically determine the range and shape of available cultural

interventions.

Traditionally, cultural diplomacy aspires to a mixed bag of countering stereotypes, building relationships, improving dialogue, telling stories, creating spaces of commonality, or raising controversial issues, often across fraught geopolitical boundaries. The recent run of "Black Watch " at the Shakespeare Theater Co. in Washington D.C., which follows the fortunes of a Scottish regiment in Iraq, is a good example of theater crossing boundaries to address controversy generated by security decision-making.

Yet ours is a moment characterized by multilateral and political formulations of cultural property, whereby culture is conceived as a rivalrous, exclusive source of identity, existentially threatened, and with sharply defined boundaries to be defended and safeguarded. And "cultural security," with its associated language of strategic value and threat assessments, appears to promote the manufacture of an increasing "climate of risk" vis-à-vis culture that seeks to solidify boundaries instead of enabling cross-over. In other words, aren't cultural diplomacy and cultural security largely at odds?