

# The Security Imaginary: Explaining Military Isomorphism

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**Abstract** This article proposes the notion of a security imaginary as a heuristic tool for exploring military isomorphism (the phenomenon that weapons and military strategies begin to look the same across the world) at a time when the US model of defence transformation is being adopted by an increasing number of countries. Built on a critical constructivist foundation, the security-imaginary approach is contrasted with rationalist and neo-institutionalist ways of explaining military diffusion and emulation. Merging cultural and constructivist themes, the article offers a 'strong cultural' argument to explain why a country would emulate a foreign military model and how this model is constituted in and comes to constitute a society's security imaginary.

**Keywords** military isomorphism • RMA • security imaginary • critical constructivism • cultural imperialism

## 1 Introduction

Since the Gulf War of 1990-91, the USA has showcased a model for military modernization in the information era. At first, this model was referred to as the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), and more recently (post-9/11) as 'transformation'. There is evidence that the RMA is the latest military model (in this case originating in the USA) to infuse the defence policies of an increasing number of states around the world, resulting in what is referred to as military isomorphism. Under the broader rubric of military change, or the more specific themes of military emulation and military diffusion, a number of authors have proffered explanations for military isomorphism (Goldman, 2006: 76). Neorealist explanations attribute the diffusion of a particular military model to the existence of a security imperative in the emulating country or competition for power in an anarchical international system (see, for example, Waltz, 1979: 127; Taliaferro, 2006; Horowitz, 2006; Resende-Santos, 2007). Neo-institutional explanations focus on the extent to which states and institutions in states interact with and become socialized, not least through professional networks, into the world cultural order (Demchak, 2000, 2002; Farrell, 2002b, 2005; Eyre & Suchman, 1996). Domestic political and structural explanations highlight the extent to which domestic interests can be mobilized for novel ideas through advocacy groups, entrepreneurs and political leadership (Farrell, 2001; Avant, 2000). Cultural theories in turn attribute military emulation to cultural

overlap between societies and the extent to which cultural diversity is tolerated in the target society (see Checkel, 1999; Goldman, 2006; Goldman & Eliason, 2003).

This article contributes to the interrogation of the process of military isomorphism by developing the idea of a security imaginary as a heuristic tool. At the time the Berlin Wall came down, Mary Kaldor (1990), the British academic and military analyst, vividly described the Cold War as an imaginary war. This imaginary war between East and West was brought into currency by military exercises, war games, espionage stories, the training of millions of soldiers and hostile rhetoric. 'Each system, at least in the imagination, threatened the very existence of the other. It was a struggle between good and evil of epic proportions. And it was substantiated by a real military confrontation and, indeed, real wars in remote parts of the world' (Kaldor, 1990: 6-7). Kaldor argued that the experience of World War II provided a formula for states to deal with deep-rooted problems in societies. The Cold War was a replication of that experience, a way to impose and extend two variants of capitalism and socialism, respectively, to 'blocs' of states. The construction of ideological animosity on such a grand scale as a formula to deal with societal problems in the postwar era was not premeditated or conspired, but an interpretation of the world that eventually came to constitute the world - that is, that had real effects on policy and lives.

Like Kaldor's idea of an 'imaginary war', the notion of a security imaginary is founded on the belief that security and insecurity (or threat) are not objective realities that can be observed and responded to, but are constructed through the fixing of meanings to things, an identity to 'the self' and others, and the relationships that are thus instituted. In this sense, the present article places culture at the centre of analysis, since culture is the context within which people make sense of the world around them and which is indeed the source of their impetus to act in a certain way and not another. In the collective, diverse imagination of a people, its members think about the 'threats' for their society, and the means to avoid or resist those threats. Features of the security imaginary are substantiated by political and social discourse. Journals, speeches, studies, proposals, conversations, reports, news broadcasts and accounts of all kinds contribute to, and draw from, negotiated understandings of circumstances, capabilities and 'others'. The security imaginary is thus not make-believe, but a powerful presence in political and social life that amply evidences and reproduces itself.

The present article starts off by juxtaposing the constructivist basis of the security-imaginary approach with the rationalist basis of neorealism, showing how the latter is inadequate to explain military isomorphism. Second, the article proceeds to explain the heuristic of a security imaginary and to situate it within constructivist literature in international relations (IR) and security studies. Finally, it illustrates how the security-imaginary heuristic can be applied to enrich our understanding of military isomorphism.

## **The Shortcomings of a Rationalist Approach**

Diffusion can be defined as 'the process that involves the transmission of new information; the decision by elites to adopt new technologies, ideas, and practices; and ultimately the assimilation of those ideas into institutions and practices' (Goldman, 2006: 69). For neorealists, military diffusion is related to external threat. States facing external insecurity will more likely adapt their military models to those 'contrived by the country of greatest capability and ingenuity' (Waltz, 1979: 127). Based on a rationalist approach to defence policymaking (and therefore choices about military models), neorealism assumes 'insecurity' or 'threat' exists objectively and can be known with some certainty. Policymakers, and those who influence them, thus identify insecurities (or security threats) and propose appropriate responses, judging the most effective action in a certain historical, economic, political and technological context. Moreover, in a competitive international system, it is 'rational' for states to emulate the most advanced military models, a process only inhibited by a lack of information and resources (Waltz, 1979: 127).<sup>1</sup>

This article moves away from a rationalist epistemology.<sup>2</sup> It draws on readings of social imaginaries in the work of, among others, Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) and Charles Taylor (2004). Both these authors emphasize the importance of understanding the negotiation of cultural meanings in society. Theoretically, the article is thus grounded in constructivism and employs an interpretive methodology that is in essence concerned with decoding and explaining meaning. As Bevir & Rhodes (2004: 131-132) assert, 'Interpretive approaches start with the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved.' In this sense, culture, defined as 'webs of meaning', becomes central, because meaning is context specific and humans and social groups negotiate it. In the words of Clifford Geertz (1993: 9), 'I take culture to be those webs [of signification], and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.'<sup>3</sup>

A study by Emily E. Goldman & Thomas G. Mahnken (2004) on the diffusion of the RMA in Asia can be used to illustrate the difference between a rationalist and a constructivist/interpretive approach. Goldman and her team of researchers aim to establish both the extent to and the way in which the RMA (or elements thereof) is adopted and adapted by a state. The study follows the methodology of so-called diffusion diagnostics, which involves four key tasks that form the basis of investigation. These are: (1) identifying the incentives or motives to adopt new

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<sup>1</sup> See Taliaferro (2006) for a neoclassical realist argument of how the state's ability to extract resources affects military diffusion. See also Demchak's (2000) accounts of how developing countries overcome resource scarcity when emulating the RMA.

<sup>2</sup> It is recognized that both neorealist and pluralist explanations of military isomorphism share a rationalist foundation; see Farrell (2005).

<sup>3</sup> The convergence of culturalist and constructivist themes is in line with Farrell's (2002a) call for a coherent cultural/constructivist research programme.

practices; (2) identifying the models that are likely to be targets of adoption or off-sets; (3) identifying the ease with which military technology and ideas are likely to be absorbed in different environments; and (4) capturing the results of military diffusion within states and organisations in order to understand indigenous patterns and the range of possible adaptations (Goldman, 2004: 4).

Diffusion diagnostics emphasizes how a response to insecurity (or an approach to security - the RMA) is selected and altered to fit the peculiarities of a country's security environment. In contrast, a constructivist approach, as elaborated in this article, aims to establish the extent to and ways in which the RMA (or elements thereof) is adopted (consciously or unconsciously) and adapted (consciously or unconsciously) to fit a country's particular security environment *as this environment is constituted by society*. It also aims to outline how that environment (or the security imaginary that constitutes that environment) is changed through a dialectical process. The emphasis is on this dialectic between response and understanding of a security world.

Tim Huxley's (2004) exploration of RMA adoption in Singapore as part of the Goldman study illustrates this distinction. Huxley asserts that 'geopolitical circumstances have forced Singapore's government to take defence extremely seriously since the city-state separated from Malaysia in 1965'. Geopolitical circumstances are portrayed as objectively given, not as a function of perception. The fact that 'Singapore's leaders have increasingly stressed the importance of exploiting technology to compensate for the lack of strategic depth and shortage of professional military manpower' is seen as part of an objective calculus in their peculiar geopolitical situation.

A constructivist approach would ask to what extent this objective choice to pursue the RMA is subjectively based. It would concentrate more on the cultural raw material that those who influence defence policy draw on when they interpret their security situation and choose a response to it. In addition, it would explore how cultural raw material finds expression in organizations. The work of Lynn Eden (2004) can be used to shed light on this aspect. Eden employs the concepts 'organizational frames' and 'knowledge-laden organizational routines'. An organizational frame can be identified by looking at what problems actors in an organization are trying to solve, how they conceive of solutions, what assumptions about the world and organizational purpose they bring to problem-solving, and how they explain why their acts are sensible. Organizational frames become operational and codified in the form of knowledge-laden routines. These routines are based on the capacity that an organization builds through allocating resources and drawing on expertise to solve the problems it has identified and decided to solve. What has become organizational 'common sense' is embedded in organizational routines. In this sense, the organizational frames and routines of a state's armed forces can be studied to get a sense of the security imaginary (see also Farrell, 1996).

An interpretive methodology would also open the way to a more critical appraisal of the impact of the US construction of the RMA as a universal and inevitable model for state defence in the 21st century on Singapore's perceptions of military security, especially given that country's close military ties with the United States. Finally, it would ask how the pursuit of the RMA might impact on organizational frames and, in turn, cultural factors that ground Singaporean security perceptions. Huxley (2004) quotes a young army officer writing in 1992:

Our Asian heritage has unfortunately put too much premium on the value of 'face'. We are exceedingly hierarchy-conscious to the extent that constructive criticism is extremely rare from bottom-up. It will take much time and deliberate effort to dispel the fear of . . . subordinates to speak up if they think their superiors are in the wrong, and for the latter to accept constructive criticism.

This recurring emphasis on the need for decentralized command structures in Singaporean defence journals is regarded by Huxley as a necessary step towards the adoption of the RMA. An interpretive approach would see this as a good example of how the adoption of the RMA (construed as essential for dealing with 21st-century threats) informs organizational frames and, in turn, broader constructions of identity in society. The dialectic process between response and the understanding of the security world outlined above would be made explicit. In this respect, such an interpretive approach could also lead into an exploration and critique of the extent to which the RMA is essentially changing how Singaporeans see themselves and their security world.

The circular construction of public mind and military self-understanding occurs through military images/propaganda as well as through economic and social restructuring to mobilize the resources needed to develop or acquire a military model. A good illustration is the case of South Africa under apartheid. The acquisition and reverse engineering of Western military technology (despite arms boycotts) by South Africa, which imagined itself as an outpost of the West during the Cold War under threat from a 'total communist onslaught' (Nathan, Batchelor & Lamb, 1997), reproduced its Western identity in the public mind. Coffee-table books on the South African-Angolan war and military parades imprinted an image of a 'legitimate' Western defence force fighting illegitimate communist terrorists, while efforts to sustain the country's forward-defence model reverberated throughout society. Not only were vast sections of the economy geared towards sustaining the apartheid war machine, but militarization of society already started at school level (Batchelor & Willett, 1998: 102).<sup>4</sup> This is not a unique situation. Examples abound of how military models infuse the public mind, whether they be the 'duck and cover' exercises taught to US citizens during the Cold War or military funding of university programmes to produce the graduates and research necessary to sustain a particular military model. The Goldman study seems to go beyond a purely rationalist approach by acknowledging cultural factors - such as institutional inertia, power relations and existing identities within 'the state' - that inhibit or enable RMA diffusion. In fact, it

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the militarization of South African society during this period, see Cock & Nathan (1989) and Grundy (1988).

concludes that 'cultural factors (e.g., shared values about how society should be structured and function, and about the purpose and limits of armed violence) are widely cited in literature as critical to diffusion' (Goldman, 2002: 20). In some instances, the study discards the ontological assumptions of neorealism - for example, that the state is a unitary 'rational' actor. At first glance, the prominence placed on culture might be regarded as nothing else than a description of a society's security imaginary. However, a key element of the notion of (a social or security) imaginary is that there is a continual, reciprocal and constitutive relationship between what people do and what they think they should do, thus between understanding and practice (so-called performative actions). Although the Goldman study's inclusion of cultural factors and their impact on the RMA has the potential to explain this dialectic, the explanation is truncated, failing to take the next step and recognize that there is a mutually constitutive relationship. This leaves the reader with the impression that the security environment is regarded as objectively given, external to society and not constituted. It can objectively be determined, and countries respond to it through the policies they adopt. The RMA changes these policies as it is adopted, but it does not change the way in which the security environment is constructed. In contrast to a constructivist/interpretive view of the RMA and RMA diffusion, for the authors of the Goldman study the existing security imaginary (thesis) and the RMA (antithesis) never really fuse into a new - constituted - security world (synthesis). Consequently, their (rationalist) methodology (diffusion diagnostics) gives rise to a linear causal approach to RMA diffusion.

Apart from different epistemological presumptions, the truncated explanation might in some way also be the result of the objective implicit in the Goldman study. As Robert Cox famously asserted in a 1981 article, theory is always for someone and for some purpose. Goldman (2002: 1) expresses the study's purpose as follows:

Even as [US military leaders] try to prod the process [the unfolding RMA] along within the United States armed forces in the hopes of prolonging American military preeminence, they must attend to the RMA's diffusion abroad for dynamics outside of the United States will determine the future of the current RMA as much as, if not more than, developments inside the United States.

If the goal of the study, then, is to collect information about RMA diffusion for US decision-makers, it is clear that the next step of the dialectic between the RMA and the security imaginaries of those countries emulating the RMA is irrelevant. For the authors of the Goldman study, it does not matter how the RMA informs the collective Singaporean mind: the aim is to determine whether the Singaporean military might be taking greater advantage of the RMA and how that will affect US security.

This is typical of what Cox (1992) calls 'problem-solving' theory, 'which takes the present as given and reasons about how to deal with particular problems within the existing order of things', as opposed to critical theory, which 'stands back from the existing order of things to ask how that order came into being, how it may be changing, and how that change may be influenced or channelled'. A key difference is that a problem-solving approach 'focuses synchronically upon the immediate and

reasons in terms of fixed relationships, [whereas] critical theory works in a more historical and diachronic dimension'.

An interpretive methodology for the study of military isomorphism would place emphasis on the nature of change (if any) that the diffusion of the RMA is bringing about in the constitution of security in other countries. It is thus necessary to study change in greater depth than that articulated in policy documents or statements by elite strata in society about security. Although these 'first-order' changes manifesting in an immediately observable way might portray *perceptions* of the security world, they are not a mirror image of the security imaginary, which denotes a much more complex and wider cultural background to social practices.

A rationalist approach can be criticized in two respects. First, it makes certain ontological presumptions (both factual and normative) about international relations, such as the existence of international anarchy and how states pursue their interests within such an international society. These presumptions lead not only to a one-sided view of international relations, but to the reproduction of this distorted construction of international relations. Second, the positivist epistemology of a traditional approach does not acknowledge subjectivity in security thinking and practice, and thus minimizes the role attributed to culture in security-related practices. Even when cultural factors are acknowledged, a rationalist approach does not go far enough in recognizing the dynamic nature of culture and therefore negates the dialectical relationship between security practices and cultural factors. Culture is but a variable, and the relationship between culture and RMA adoption is treated as causal, rather than constitutive (see Weldes, 2003: 8).

### **Tracing the Contours of a Security Imaginary**

Having outlined the inadequacy of the rationalist basis of neorealist explanations of military isomorphism, I will now examine the heuristic of a security imaginary and how it comes into being through the interaction among knowledge, power and practice.

As noted above, the first-order changes as consciously articulated in aspects of security policy are insufficient to gauge the impact of the RMA on a society. This is precisely because they might only reflect disembodied ideas of an elite regarding what they think security policy should look like. The security imaginary is not reducible to these articulations. Taylor (2004: 23) notes that the social imaginary is how 'ordinary people' (in addition to civil servants, professors of security studies or the CEOs of arms companies) imagine their social environment. It is shared by large groups of people, if not society as a whole, and is the common understanding that makes common practices possible and as a result creates a shared sense of legitimacy.

To delineate a structuring principle of the common understandings that make security practices possible in a society is not an easy task. Like other imaginary social significations (e.g. God in religious cultures), those primary significations that constitute the security world have no precise place of existence where one might look for them. The collective subconscious of society is difficult to study in Freudian fashion. An aggravating factor is that, where security of the state is concerned, 'ordinary people' often have little direct say in decisions to go to war or to buy certain arms and not others. However, if ordinary people's acceptance or rejection of (or indifference to) their exclusion from security policy is seen as an act of cultural expression, it may well provide a pointer to a structuring principle. For example, the apathy of ordinary people in relation to their marginalization in state security policy could be explained and problematized, instead of being overlooked as a given of the Westphalian system. In the same sense, a critical interpretation of security practices (and not just those by elites in the security sector) that have become common sense might offer a glimpse of the context of deeper cultural meanings concerning the security world.

The argument thus links up with David Campbell's (1988) *Writing Security*, a key constructivist text in IR. Campbell explains the Cold War in terms of representations of US and Soviet Union identity as opposed to material threat. For Campbell, a set of representational practices must be redeployed to continually reproduce identity (an understanding of the self, others and the world). Similarly, the interpretation of security practices argued for here is critical as opposed to conventional (Hopf, 1998: 181-185). Conventional constructivism leaves space for a positivist methodology (or 'normal science') and claims to be normatively neutral. It treats identity as a cause of state action and leaves it at that. This is a position that critical constructivists cannot fathom, because they see theory as constitutive. In addition, critical constructivism aims at 'exploding the myths associated with identity formation' by unmasking power relations in the interest of enlightenment and emancipation (Hopf, 1998: 184; see also Booth, 1991). It thus also 'claims an interest in change, and a capacity to foster change' (Hopf, 1998: 184), or, as Farrell (2002a: 59) dramatizes, 'social theory is a weapon for waging war on inequality and injustice in world politics'.<sup>5</sup>

To facilitate a critical interpretation of how certain military models come to inform security imaginaries around the world, it is useful to outline the three analytically separable dimensions of the process of social representation implicit in a cultural approach. This will be done with an eye on how the military comes to be constructed in society. These dimensions are articulation, interpellation and enactment, and relate in particular to the relationship between power and the organization of social meanings (Althusser, 1970; Hall, 1980; Muppidi, 1999: 125).

*Articulation* is the coming of a belief that two meaning-elements - such as 'military' and 'defence' - are naturally associated, linked to one another (see Hall, 1980: 324). Such associations are not necessarily intrinsic or self-evident. Their arrangement may

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion on critical theory in security studies, see Wyn Jones (1999).



be conventional (i.e. a product of habit) or arbitrary (Muppidi, 1999: 125). The connection between 'statehood' and 'military capability' described by Eyre & Suchman (1996) is an example from the field of security of how certain terms and ideas come to connote one another. The authors argue that possessing a defence force has become a symbol of statehood aptly reflected in the following statement by Sylvanus Olympio, president of Togo from 1960 to 1966: 'We cannot be an independent nation without an army of some sort' (cited in Eyre & Suchman, 1996: 79). A further case in point is Namibia, of which Eyre & Suchman (1996: 82) write: 'As a symbol of their statehood, the incipient Namibian state created a flag and an army of more than a thousand soldiers. That the army was (and remains) essentially militarily insignificant when compared with those of its possible foes is irrelevant to its clearly significant symbolic role.'

Having a defence force is, however, not a necessary condition for statehood, as illustrated by Costa Rica's decision not to have one. And, contrary to how mainstream approaches to security would have it, the decision to have a defence force is also not based on external threat or necessitated by national interests that come with statehood. Rather, the thought of not having a defence force would, for most people who have to decide on this matter, 'violate their sense of being at that particular time and place' (Somers & Gibson, quoted in Latham, 2000: 16). These ideas are not unique to Togo or Namibia, but are transnational conceptions of what constitutes a 'state'.

Among articulated meanings are identities, what Foucault (1970) would call 'subject-positions'. Subjects (or actors) are identified, and the roles they fulfil, their derivative interests and the relationships between them are conjured by forging links between sets of meanings. Articulation entails the weaving of an ontological narrative or telling a 'constitutive story' to make sense of the world or events, institutions or actions in the world (Latham, 2000: 16). 'These stories make use of extant cultural 'raw material' such as linguistic resources or lived experience, but the story (or plot) that is imposed on a complex array of lived experience, for example, is selective and reductive. Rather than a true reflection, the narrative invokes from the range of experiences only those that can be interpreted in support of a storyline. In this respect, Jutta Weldes (1996: 295) outlines how the orthodox US story about the 'Cuban missile crisis' was produced:

the 'missile crisis' was constructed out of articulations that defined the Soviet Union, the United States, Latin America, the 'Western hemisphere', Cuba, the Castro government and 'the Cuban people' as particular kinds of objects. It depended as well on various quasi-causal arrangements, including the pervasive invocation of the 'Munich' syndrome and the dangers of appeasement, falling of dominoes and of Trojan horses.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on 'the narrative construction of reality', see Bruner (1991).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of how historical experience and policy are invoked and reinterpreted to justify policies in the present, see Buffet & Heuser (1998).

Officials (and others) build security narratives from 'real' facts and existing cultural 'raw material' (used to fix meanings). As for 'real' facts, the sheer existence of things will govern how they may be adduced. That Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction posed an imminent threat to world peace was discredited when no such weapons were found. Similarly, gaps in cultural raw materials limit narratives, prompting Weldes (1996: 286) to refer to 'the interpretive possibilities permitted by interactive discourses or inter- subjective structures of meaning available within a particular situation at a particular historical juncture'. The orthodox construction of the Cuban missile crisis benefited, for example, from the identities that were constructed around the Soviet Union and the United States from the 1940s onwards.

People following a narrative sometimes see themselves in a character. In the narrative, the character's identity or subject-position is created by the articulation of meanings. Althusser (1970) terms being drawn into such an identity *interpellation*, the second dimension of representation. For the person drawn in, 'recruited' or 'hailed' as a subject, the representation and the social relationships it constructs come to make sense. The extent to which people take up interpellations is an indication of the extent to which they are convinced and compelled by the associations between meanings in a narrative (Muppidi, 1999: 126). Or, as Jerome Bruner (1991: 13) would say, interpellation reflects the 'acceptability' of a narrative.

Because connections between meanings are not intrinsic, they are often contested, and therefore articulation and interpellation involve what Muppidi (1999: 126) refers to as the 'politics of meaning fixing'. Social groups struggle among one another to gain pre-eminence over social thought and practice. One way to get the public (or officials, for that matter) to believe a storyline, and therefore to regard one set of links between meanings as legitimate and not another, is to state them consistently as natural, self-evident and unproblematic. To sustain the 'regime of truth' (to borrow again from Foucault [1980]) of a narrative, articulations must be reproduced continuously so that the connections are reconfirmed. The aim is for a particular representation of an object, event or person to become common sense - that is, 'treated as if they neutrally or transparently reflected reality' (Weldes, 1996: 303).

This stage of representation can be likened to Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Hegemony is a kind of dominance over social thought and practice so deeply rooted in social life that those who are being dominated regard it as natural. It is like a horizon beyond which society finds it impossible to look (Feenberg, 1995a: 10; see also Clifford Geertz's [1975] work on 'common sense'). Social groups engage in political work to fix meanings and sustain them, but they are not the only locus of agency that sustains a narrative.

*Enaction*, the third dimension of representation, occurs when people have identified with a subject-position dictated by the social relations scripted in a narrative and start to enact the role that corresponds with their sense of identity. This 'social doing' in itself reproduces the links between meanings and as such sustains the narrative. In a similar way, security practices not only carry the understanding of security to

expression, but reproduce the security imaginary. The structure created by a narrative is therefore sustained by agency, and the agents are not only elites and officials that have power over opinion, but also 'ordinary people' that enact a narrative and in that way produce reality. Cynthia Enloe (1989: 16) takes up this point when she remarks that, as the wives of colonial administrators or as missionaries, travel writers and anthropologists, women from imperialist countries filled their roles in a way that perpetuated colonial subjugation of African, Latin American and Asian women, even if they were not themselves the architects of colonial policies and might themselves have been victims of gendered relations of power.

The sources of power through which a narrative is created and sustained are manifold, and so too the power relations that a narrative creates. At this stage, it might be more useful to talk about discourse in the Foucauldian sense rather than ontological narratives, although the two are closely related. Discourse is a 'system of representation' that reflects the mutual reinforcing character of power and knowledge, conduct and language. People enact the identities that hailed them and view a storyline of a narrative as 'true' because a specific discourse turns up across different texts and practices at different social institutions, supporting the same framework for talking about and acting upon an issue. This Foucault referred to as a discursive formation (Hall, 1997: 44).

The power that creates and sustains a discourse is not from a single source or in a single direction - for example, top down from the state or ruling class to the margins that have no resources or access to fix meanings for society based on their lived experience. Power circulates and permeates and is reproduced on every level of social life, whether public or private, the law and the economy, or the family and sexuality (Hall, 1997: 49). As a result of diverse forms of political power, there are thus multiple hierarchies. Moreover, the multiple hierarchies, Enloe (1996: 193) writes,

do not sit on the social landscape like tuna, egg and cheese sandwiches sitting on an icy cafeteria counter, diversely multiple but unconnected. They relate to each other, sometimes in ways that subvert one another, sometimes in ways that provide each with their respective resiliency. The bedroom's hierarchy is not unconnected to the hierarchies of the international coffee exchange or of the foreign ministry.

A final point related to power, knowledge and the formation of the imaginary, is that those at the 'margins . . . and bottom rungs' (Enloe, 1996) do not just wait to be interpellated and, even if interpellated, do not necessarily play the role scripted in the narrative in zombie-like fashion. There are forms of resistance aptly described by James Scott (1985) as 'weapons of the weak' that highlight how the 'powerless' assert their own understanding of the world within the framework of dominant discourses. Although ordinary people's perception of security is the target of manipulation by elites, they can also be the brake on elite adventurism. Judith Butler's (1993, 1997) notion of performativity can be invoked here to show that the mutually reinforcing relationship between understanding and doing does not necessarily imply continuity (i.e. affirmation of subjectivity). Butler understands the agency of a subject that engages in representational practices as socially constructed, but not predetermined.

Subjectivity (or, in this case, a particular understanding of security) need not be reproduced. Through a dialectic relationship between what people do and what they think they should do, diachronically, meanings can change (be renegotiated), and thus the social imaginary can transform itself over time (see Kubalkova, 1998: 30-31). This is also true for societies' imaginary of their security world.

The complexity of a security imaginary should be clear from the above discussion. Multiple discourses feature and interact in the social imaginary and affect how people come to understand and practice security in a society. Power is important to fix meanings that would induce hegemony in the security world, but we should not only look to the conventional sources of power to get a sense of the security imaginary. For that, we have to include 'ordinary people' as well as the 'margins, silences and bottom rungs' and how they contribute to the constitution of security. Their contribution is especially on the interpretive level of social representation - in other words, where meanings come to connote things. Ordinary people's lived experience and cultural references provide the cultural raw material that could be drawn upon to legitimize denoted (first-order) meanings, which are forged by elites.

There are two disconnects prevalent in the way security is often conceptualized in IR that cast doubt on whether IR is the appropriate location for the security-imaginary approach. First, IR makes an apparently commonsensical distinction between 'inside' (domestic) and 'outside' (international), and, second, IR is preoccupied with a military notion of security as opposed to non-military security. These disconnects are best reflected by the terms social security and national security, respectively. Social security entails soft policy issues in the domestic realm, such as old-age pensions. National security commonly denotes a foreign policy or military response directed at the outside world (Neocleous, 2006: 376, 364). It could surely be argued that 'for most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, security from crime - these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world' (Wood & Shearing, 2007: 65). Given the inside/outside and military/non-military disconnects, can IR cope with a widening of the security agenda not just to include non-military threats and individuals as referent objects of security (see Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998), but with (in)security as rooted in culture?

The answer can be gauged from Kaldor's insight that an imaginary war (the Cold War) was necessary to deal with societal problems in both the East and the West. The constructivist turn in IR provides theoretical space to question the apparent disconnects in IR's conceptions of security. What Kaldor recognizes implicitly, Neocleous (2006) makes explicit through tracing the conceptual, political and historical links between the concepts social security and national security in the United States during the 1930s. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt equated the New Deal with national security, noting 'our nation's programme of social and economic reform is therefore a part of defense, as basic as armaments themselves' (quoted in Neocleous, 2006: 375). But, Roosevelt's plan for US security did not stop at US

borders. It involved rolling out the same principle to the 'family of Nations', fabricating economic order on a global scale. In this sense, national security is not only defence of 'a way of life', but expanding/imposing 'a way of life'. Neocleous thus solves the security disconnects of mainstream IR through bringing together themes in security studies and international political economy.

The security imaginary makes explicit the relationship between the social and the security imaginary. The notion of a security imaginary is not simply an extension of the concept 'social imaginary' so as to apply it to the study of security, but instead refers to that part of the social imaginary as 'a map of social space' that is specific to society's common understanding and expectations about security and makes practices related to security possible (see also Taylor's [2004: 26] remark on social space). The security imaginary takes cognizance of the cultural raw material that needs to be present for various associations (or meanings or 'signifieds') that the word 'security' might denote at different times for a society. Although this article deals with military isomorphism (and therefore a 'national security' issue), it is recognized that the emulation of a military model is framed in narratives of power and resistance. It cannot be seen separately from what Neocleous (2000, 2006) refers to as the fabrication of social and economic order both inside and outside the originating country.

Having outlined the heuristic of a security imaginary and how it comes into being through the interaction among knowledge, power and practice, the article will now turn to the ways in which the security imaginary might come to be influenced by models of military transformation in other societies.

### **Military Isomorphism as Homogenizing Security Imaginaries**

The social imaginary that invokes and is in turn reproduced by the real and symbolic connections that constitute a society and its boundaries is prone to change over time. Trans-societal exchanges result in the negotiation of new meanings and bring about a cultural dialectic that could transform the social imaginary. These exchanges are likely to increase as access to travel and information technology increases. As that part of the social imaginary that relates to the understanding of security in society, the security imaginary is also subject to change through this process. The security imaginary is therefore open to influence from perceptions, beliefs and understandings of other societies about security.

One way of exploring this process is by means of sociological institutionalism. As a constructivist approach, sociological institutionalism 'examines how norms evolve within transnational organizational fields, are diffused through transnational professional networks, and take worldwide effect' (Farrell, 2005: 450). Norms derive from shared beliefs about what can be considered normal and acceptable behaviour in a given situation in a society. Norms prescribe behaviour (what should be done)

based on a society's understanding of the world and its place in it. It is in this way that norms emanate from the social imaginary and in turn reproduce it.

A sociological-institutionalist approach assumes that there are transnational norms that shape how states generate military power. Farrell (2005: 450) identifies two sets of norms in this respect, namely, norms of conventional warfare and norms of international humanitarian law. Norms of conventional warfare delineate the basic blueprint for military organization, namely, 'standing, standardized, technologically structured' (Farrell, 2005: 462) military forces. Norms of humanitarian law, in turn, outline what modes (e.g. genocide) and means (e.g. chemical weapons) of warfare are unacceptable. As such, they define what is morally appropriate behaviour in military operations. Farrell considers both sets of norms as expressions of world culture. For the purposes of the argument here, the present section will mainly focus on norms of conventional warfare.

Farrell's approach is useful in that it tries to incorporate rationalist approaches in a constructivist theory to explain the seeming isomorphism in the way that states generate military power. In Farrell's view, this isomorphism is a result of normative pressure in addition to the logic of a security imperative, maximizing power and the notion that military organizations are by nature competitive. Similarly, bureaucratic or alliance politics transpire within a normative context. Policymakers may manipulate military policy to gain advantage for their own organizations (or themselves). States may direct alliance policy to favour their national interests. However, these factors occur within the framework of world military cultural norms. States organize their militaries in a certain way and engage in warfare in a certain way because that is what is expected of them as part of the society of states. To be sure, when a state perceives an increase in threat, it may stretch norms that are not well established or engage in strategic behaviour within the limits set by the norm to address the security imperative. In the same sense, in the event that policymakers manipulate bureaucratic or alliance policy, this behaviour is either overridden by normative pressure or legitimized by it (Farrell, 2005: 452).

From the discussion of social representation, it should be clear that there is a two-pronged process at work when it comes to the way normative pressure facilitates military isomorphism. First, norms need to be established. Certain practices need to be endowed with meaning, namely, that they are normal and acceptable behaviour for states to generate military power. This phase cannot be seen separately from international political discourses that create the hegemony (in a Gramscian sense) or obviousness (in an Althusserian sense) that determines what is 'normal and acceptable behaviour' for states. Latham (2000: 7) explains, for example, how the 'historical and mutually constitutive relationship between discourses of the 'laws of war', on the one hand, and the politico-cultural identities of 'Christendom', 'Europe' and (most recently) 'the West', on the other, contributed to the development of the category of 'inhumane weapons'. Weapons are not classified as inhumane because of their objective properties that make them inherently viler than other weapons.

Rather, this classification derived from European attempts at the end of the 19th century to prove (not least to themselves) that European societies epitomized civilization. As European officials started to identify with this self-representation, they established norms (or endowed certain practices with the meaning) of 'civilized international conduct'.

In the same sense, the norms of conventional warfare, for example, did not evolve because 'standing, standardized, technologically structured' forces made objective military sense. Their development is interlinked with dominant political discourses, and, when scrutinized, it is clear that these discourses contain elements of cultural imperialism. In fact, Farrell's typically conventional constructivist account of how these norms evolved to become 'world culture' highlights and to an extent reproduces these elements. His account is dealt with in some detail here because it illustrates a fundamental point in the discourse on the homogenization of military behaviour that conventional constructivist explanations often ignore.

Farrell (2005: 464-465) sketches the historical evolution of the Western military model of standing armies and how this is intricately linked with the rise of the modern state. He then notes how this model was imposed by the colonial powers on their colonies and taken up by other powers to guard against European expansion. The professionalization of the officer corps in Europe and the United States by the end of the 19th Century was an important driver of global military isomorphism, since it became the mechanism through which 'world-wide institutionalisation of collective beliefs about appropriate military forms and practices' occurred.

This is also true for contemporary diffusion of these norms, 'which involves officers being sent to be trained in foreign academies, and foreign military advisors, military literature and equipment being received' (Farrell, 2005: 465). What Farrell understands under 'foreign' seems to be 'Western'. He specifically notes that 'developed states' (the USA, Canada, the UK, Germany and France) run schemes to educate foreign military officers. The most prominent of these schemes are the British Military Advisory and Training Team (BMATT) and the US International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme, giving world norms an even more restricted Anglo-Saxon substance. He definitely does not look to Chinese, Japanese, Latin American or African norms of military organization to determine how universal the 'world' military norms are.

Farrell then distinguishes between two sets of countries when it comes to the current adherence to norms of conventional warfare. For major and regional powers, it makes sense - that is, military and economic sense - to follow these norms. On the other hand, as emulators become increasingly removed from the position of the great powers, in terms of both resource levels and geostrategic circumstances, however, isomorphism makes decreasing military sense and is more likely to be due to normative pressure. Yet ironically, this is where most of the emulation occurs (Farrell, 2005: 465).

Normative isomorphism seems for the most part a one-way flow, 'with the poor and weak and peripheral copying the rich and strong and central' (John W. Meyer, quoted in Farrell, 2005: 466). This Farrell attributes to weak states wanting the prestige attached to great-power military symbols, as well as the certainty provided by great-power scripts for military action. Instead of explicitly looking for deeper explanations for this one-way normative isomorphism, he seems to be saying that strong and regional powers follow norms of conventional warfare because they make military sense for them (are objective and rational). Weak states, on the other hand, follow these norms because they are 'cultural dopes' and naively think that adhering to these norms will bring about prestige akin to that of major powers.

What Farrell overlooks is that norms of conventional warfare are imagined properties of Western militaries sold as 'world culture', not least by his own discussion. The fact that other societies emulate these norms is tied in with a certain discourse of development. This discourse is largely rooted in the West's conceptions of its own development portrayed as progress, growth and expansion. The West's military dominance is imagined as confirmation that it has found *the* way to organize militaries, just as the West's economic dominance is interpreted as a sign of its having discovered *'the way of life'* for human societies (Cornelius Castoriadis, quoted in Tomlinson, 1991: 154). In both cases, the West feels it needs to educate other societies in these matters. This discourse establishes identities, such as 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' or 'developing' societies, as well as the relations between them, and can be portrayed in terms of cultural domination.

The concept of cultural imperialism, as Tomlinson (1991: 3) notes, is itself the result of a largely Western discourse and is invoked by different scholars to mean different things. In this article, cultural imperialism is the result of a certain way of perceiving 'development', one that has its origins in Western societies. Cultural domination is not seen as the imposition of a Western way of military organization on another society. Rather, cultural imperialism is seen in the Gramscian sense as making certain norms that are characteristic of Western societies (some would say the 'Global North') seem like common military sense. To be sure, and as Farrell acknowledges, agency needs to be recognized in the decision to enact a military script or not.

This relates to the second phase of the two-pronged process of military isomorphism through normative pressure. After being articulated, norms are diffused through interpellation and enactment. The process of interpellation occurs through professional networks, such as BMATT or IMAT, where scripts and norms are taught. This is not to say that states slavishly follow these scripts. It does suggest, however, that norms become part of a state's cultural raw material, which their agents may draw upon when it comes to military practice. Whether norms are emulated is a function of cultural match between the discourses that these norms emanate from and the local social imaginary (Farrell, 2005: 456).



A quotation from Major General Paul Kagame (later to become the president of Rwanda) illustrates the point. Kagame asserts: 'We [Rwandans] are used to fighting wars in a very cheap way. . . . Our people don't drive tanks, we don't have any aircrafts. They don't fight with fighter aircrafts. People move on foot. They eat very little food. We are able to go like that for many years without a problem' (quoted in Wakabi & Ochieng, 1999). With this statement, he is not saying that Rwandans choose not to follow the 'world cultural' norm of a technologically structured force because they are too poor or have no military need for it. He is saying that, at that particular point in time, Rwandans' understanding of warfare, and indeed of themselves and the world, is different from that of Western societies. There is not a sufficient perceived cultural match (or overlap) between Rwanda's security imaginary and those of Western society from where this norm originates. On the other hand, should Rwandans start viewing themselves and warfare in terms that correspond with Western military norms, they do not want to be told that they are cultural dopes or militarily irrational. This is the liberal fallacy. A number of liberal multinational institutions (such as the World Bank, the UN and the IMF) and nongovernmental organizations prescribe 'world norms' of disarmament and demilitarization to developing countries, but invoke a similar impression of cultural imperialism by denying developing countries freedom of choice of the narratives and identities they want to enact.

Perceived cultural match (or overlapping social imaginaries) and reinforcing discourses are important factors in the process by which one society's security imaginary is infused by military models from other societies. If cultures are perceived to be mismatched, discourses are not reinforcing, or social imaginaries diverge, military models from one society may not come to infuse another's security imaginary. Or, they may be constituted quite differently in the adopting society or may be adopted for different reasons than originally developed. For example, decision-makers in one society may perceive a degree of 'match' about desirable weapons and military training, and there may be discursive overlap in the norms adhered to in the two societies. If, however, public corruption, while present, is not a major force in the 'model' country, whereas it is ever-present in the 'recipient' country, perhaps even 'necessary' to sustain the social fabric, the diffused model may come to be constituted quite differently in the latter. Charles Taylor (2004: 196), in tracing the forms of social imaginaries that grounded the growth of Western modernity, offers another possibility:

If we give its [sic] rightful place to the different understandings that animate similar institutions and practices even in the West, it should be all the more obvious how much greater are the differences among the major civilizations. The fact that these are in a sense growing closer to each other, and learning from each other, doesn't do away with, but only masks the differences, because the understanding of what it is to borrow or to come close to the other is often very different from different standpoints.

The Western model of military organization is certainly 'the object of creative imitation', to use Taylor's (2004: 196) phrase. The reasons for the adoption of a certain model and the way in which this model is adapted by non-Western states have

deep cultural roots corresponding with these societies' social and security imaginaries. Taylor calls the divergent development paths of different societies 'multiple modernities'. Andrew Feenberg (1995b) even allows for the pursuit of 'alternative modernity' where the divergence from a particular development path is more deliberate. The idea that globalization will homogenize social imaginaries and, with them, security imaginaries needs to be viewed with Taylor's cautionary remark and Feenberg's margin of possibility in mind.

## **Conclusion**

This article set out to contribute an alternative way of thinking about military isomorphism through the heuristic of a security imaginary. The security imaginary is that part of the social imaginary that deals with the understanding of the security world and in turn makes security practices possible. Various scholars have looked at specific case-studies to explain military diffusion from a cultural perspective. There is, however, a sense that most of these contributions provide weak cultural explanations, because they treat culture only as an enabling or inhibiting context for emulation, while domestic politics is seen as the actual mechanism that causes military diffusion (Goldman 2006: 70). The heuristic of a security imaginary contributes to stronger cultural explanations of military emulation by conceptualizing the politics of meaning-fixing as part of a process of social representation, which in turn provides insight into a society's cultural orthodoxy as such. This approach allows us not only to view culture as a causal mechanism for military diffusion, but also to investigate how a foreign military model may come to be constituted in and have an impact on the constitution of the emulating country.

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