SECURITY CULTURE BETWEEN THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT AND OPERATIONAL CATEGORY: EPISTEMOLOGICAL DELIMITATIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

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Abstract: *The concept of security culture has gained increasing prominence within contemporary Security Studies, particularly in the context of hybrid threats, cognitive warfare, and the growing emphasis on societal and national resilience. Despite its widespread use in both academic and policy discourse, security culture remains conceptually ambiguous and epistemologically under-defined, oscillating between a broad theoretical construct and a loosely operationalised normative notion. This paper addresses this gap by advancing a systematic epistemological clarification of the concept and by identifying the conditions under which it may be transformed into a coherent analytical and operational category.*

The study adopts a qualitative meta-theoretical approach, combining conceptual analysis, systematic literature review, and comparative examination of adjacent constructs such as strategic culture, political culture, and societal security. It demonstrates that the ambiguity surrounding security culture stems from conceptual diffusion across paradigmatic boundaries, as well as from the absence of clearly defined levels of abstraction and analytical criteria.

Building on these findings, the paper proposes a multidimensional framework encompassing cognitive, normative, institutional, and behavioural dimensions, each associated with empirically measurable indicators. This reconceptualisation contributes to strengthening the theoretical coherence and methodological applicability of security culture as a key variable in analysing contemporary security environments.

Keywords: *security culture, epistemology, operationalisation, theoretical construct, national resilience, security studies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has fundamentally reshaped the architecture of international security, generating a paradigm shift from a predominantly military-centric understanding of security toward a multidimensional and deeply societal construct. *Security culture* extends beyond the military domain, encompassing socio-political, economic, and cultural dimensions, reflecting its inherently multidimensional nature [1, pp. 87-88]. This transformation demonstrates the proliferation of hybrid threats, the intensification of geopolitical rivalries, and the expansion of cognitive and informational warfare, which increasingly target not only state institutions but also societal cohesion and individual perceptions. As noted in recent analyses, the contemporary security environment is characterised by fluidity, unpredictability, and the coexistence of integration and fragmentation dynamics, which challenge traditional models of threat assessment and response.

In this context, classical realist approaches, focused on military power and territorial defence, have proven insufficient to explain emerging forms of insecurity. H. Lasswell's early work provides a foundational understanding of the relationship between insecurity and communication processes, conceptualising mass insecurity as a collective condition of "pooled uncertainty and sustained anxieties" and linking it to the dynamics of propaganda and information control [2, pp. 283-284]. This confirms that classical theoretical frameworks are insufficient to capture the complexity of contemporary security dynamics and foundations of mainstream International Relations theory, which has been largely derived from the Westphalian model and therefore fails to capture the diversity and evolution of international systems across time [3, pp. 2-3]. The reconceptualisation of security advanced by B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. de Wilde shifts the focus from security as an objective condition to security as an intersubjective and socially constructed process, emerging through practices of securitization [4, pp. 24-25; 29-30].

Within this evolving epistemological landscape, the concept of *security culture* has emerged as a key analytical and normative category. It captures the capacity of societies to internalise shared values, knowledge, and behavioural patterns that enable them to anticipate, interpret, and respond to complex security challenges and can be conceptualised as a system of values, norms, attitudes, and actions shaping the understanding of security [5, p. 124]. From an analytical perspective, these elements can be interpreted as encompassing cognitive, normative, and behavioural dimensions that influence both institutional responses and societal engagement with security issues.

However, despite its increasing prominence in both academic discourse and policy frameworks, the concept remains theoretically underdeveloped and epistemologically ambiguous. It is frequently employed in divergent and sometimes inconsistent ways: as a system of values, norms, and beliefs shaping societal behaviour [6, p. 63], however, the analysis remains predominantly conceptual, with limited empirical grounding; as a phenomenon influenced by security governance mechanisms, particularly through decision-making structures, accountability, and social participation [7], or as a strategic behavioural pattern within regional and institutional contexts [8; 9]. This conceptual heterogeneity raises critical questions regarding its analytical validity and operational applicability.

Consequently, the central problem addressed by this research concerns the epistemological status of *security culture*: whether it constitutes a distinct theoretical construct, a derivative conceptual extension, or merely a descriptive label lacking analytical precision. Furthermore, the study seeks to identify the methodological conditions under which *security culture* can be transformed into an operational category suitable for empirical research.

This study adopts a qualitative meta-theoretical design, integrating a systematic literature review, conceptual analysis, and comparative theoretical synthesis in order to ensure both analytical depth and epistemological coherence. The systematic literature review enables the identification and critical examination of key contributions within the field of Security Studies, particularly those addressing *security culture* and its adjacent constructs, while the conceptual analysis facilitates the clarification of terminological ambiguities and the delimitation of the concept within a broader theoretical landscape. In parallel, the comparative theoretical synthesis allows for the evaluation and integration of diverse epistemological perspectives, contributing to the development of a coherent and unified analytical framework.

The selection of the literature was guided by three main criteria. First, relevance to the concept of *security culture* and its theoretical and empirical extensions was essential, ensuring that only sources directly contributing to the understanding of the concept were included. Second, the theoretical significance of the selected works was considered, prioritising foundational and widely recognised contributions within the discipline. Third, empirical applicability was taken into account, allowing the study to bridge the gap between abstract conceptualisation and potential operationalisation.

The analytical strategy is structured around three interrelated objectives. It seeks, firstly, to identify conceptual inconsistencies and instances of terminological ambiguity within the existing literature. Secondly, it aims to map the dominant epistemological approaches, constructivist, interpretivist, and pragmatic, highlighting their contributions as well as their limitations. Finally, the study focuses on reconstructing a coherent and integrated analytical framework, capable of reconciling these approaches and supporting the transformation of *security culture* into an operational category for both academic research and policy analysis.

This study makes three original contributions to the literature on security culture. First, it provides an epistemological clarification of the concept by integrating constructivist, interpretivist, and pragmatic approaches into a coherent analytical framework. Second, it advances a structured conceptual delimitation, distinguishing security culture from adjacent constructs such as strategic culture and political culture. Third, it proposes a multidimensional and multi-level operationalisation framework, enabling the transformation of security culture into an empirically applicable analytical category.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SECURITY CULTURE

The conceptual evolution of *security culture* is inseparable from the broader transformation of Security Studies in the post-Cold War era. This transformation also reflects a broader theoretical shift within International Relations, where the concept of the international system itself has been re-evaluated beyond state-centric and ahistorical assumptions, requiring a more complex and historically grounded analytical framework [3]. The decline of bipolar confrontation and the emergence of complex, non-linear threats necessitated a shift from state-centric paradigms toward more inclusive and interdisciplinary approaches. The Copenhagen School provided a foundational contribution by conceptualising security as a process of *securitization*, whereby issues become security concerns through discursive practices and audience acceptance; the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it; security is not an objective condition but a socially constructed and intersubjective process [4, pp. 24-25; 29-30)]. This perspective revealed the role of societal perceptions and political agency in shaping security agendas, thereby opening the analytical space for the study of cultural and cognitive dimensions.

Subsequent theoretical developments further expanded this framework. B. Buzan and R. Little emphasised the multidimensional nature of security, while M. Kaldor conceptualises contemporary security through the coexistence of four distinct “security cultures” (geopolitics, new wars, liberal peace, and the War on Terror) each characterised by specific logics of action, actors, and normative orientations. These cultures are not mutually exclusive but interact in complex and often contradictory ways, generating hybrid outcomes in contemporary conflict environments [10, pp. 12, 25, 84, 173].

These contributions laid the groundwork for conceptualising *security culture* as a distinct analytical domain. At the same time, empirical and applied studies began to explore the role of culture in shaping security practices. For instance, J. Howorth and M. Gariup examined the emergence of a European *security culture*, while F. Attinà considers that *security culture* shapes the government preference for certain security instruments rather than others [11, p. 255].

F. Attinà conceptualises *security culture* as a historically grounded and socially embedded set of beliefs, traditions, and symbolic structures that shape state preferences and strategic choices in security matters. In this perspective, *security culture* functions as a key explanatory variable for understanding patterns of cooperation and divergence in regional security arrangements [11, pp. 255-256]. In parallel, organisational approaches, such as those proposed by K. Koh, A.B. Ruighaver, S.B. Maynard, A. Ahmad and K. Roer, focus on the role of governance structures, behavioural patterns, and institutional practices in shaping

security behaviour. While K. Koh, A.B. Ruighaver, S.B. Maynard, A. Ahmad emphasise the influence of security governance on organisational culture, K. Roer reveals the gap between awareness and behaviour and conceptualises *security culture* as the interaction between people, policies, and technology [7; 12, pp. 25, 19-20].

This diversification of approaches contributed to the enrichment of the concept but also to its conceptual fragmentation. As a result, *security culture* evolved as a *hybrid construct*, situated at the intersection of theoretical reflection and practical application.

From an ontological perspective, *security culture* is most coherently conceptualised as a *socially constructed, emergent, and multi-layered phenomenon*, situated at the intersection of cognition, norms, institutions, and behaviour. It does not possess a fixed material ontology; rather, it exists as a *relational* and *processual construct*, continuously reproduced through interactions between individuals, institutional actors, and broader societal structures. In this sense, *security culture* aligns with constructivist ontologies that privilege meaning-making processes over material determinism, as articulated in the broader redefinition of security by B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. de Wilde [4].

This ontological positioning implies that *security culture* is neither reducible to formal institutional arrangements nor exhaustively captured by observable behaviour. Instead, it represents a *latent yet structuring dimension of social reality*, embedded in shared understandings, internalised norms, and patterned practices that collectively shape how security is perceived, legitimised, and enacted. As such, it functions as a *mediating layer* between objective threats and subjective responses, translating external stimuli into socially meaningful frameworks of interpretation and action. The literature consistently identifies four core components of *security culture*:

- cognitive dimension includes knowledge, awareness, and perception of threats [13; 14];
- normative dimension consists of values, beliefs, and legitimacy frameworks guiding security practices [6; 15], particularly in relation to the balance between security and individual freedoms, a tension already revealed in classical analyses [2].
- institutional dimension focuses on governance structures and policy frameworks [7; 16];
- behavioural dimension refers to patterns of action, participation, and compliance [15].

Importantly, this ontological configuration allows *security culture* to be conceptualised as a form of "cognitive capital". In this sense, it constitutes a collective resource that enhances a society's capacity to anticipate, interpret, and respond to complex and evolving threats.

Unlike material capabilities, this form of capital operates through knowledge, reflexivity, and adaptive learning, enabling both anticipatory and adaptive resilience. This interpretation is consistent with approaches that link *security culture* to national resilience in the context of hybrid threats. For instance, T. Frunzeti and C. Bărbulescu emphasise the role of *security culture* in strengthening societal preparedness, institutional coordination, and the capacity of social systems to adapt, transform, and learn in response to complex security challenges [17, pp. 16-17, 20].

M. Kaldor conceptualises "security cultures" as configurations of practices, objectives, and social relationships that generate distinct logics of action within different security frameworks. Rather than reducing *security culture* to normative or cognitive dimensions alone, this approach emphasises the interaction between institutional practices and socially embedded patterns of behaviour [10, p. 18]. This perspective suggests that *security culture* cannot be fully understood as a static set of attributes, but rather as a dynamic configuration of practices and interactions embedded within broader social and institutional contexts.

Furthermore, the ontological nature of *security culture* is inherently multi-scalar, operating simultaneously across different levels of analysis. At the *micro-level*, it manifests in individual perceptions, attitudes, and cognitive schemas. At the *meso-level*, it is embedded in organisational routines, professional norms, and institutional practices. At the *macro-level*, it is reflected in societal values, public discourse, and national policy frameworks.

This multi-level structure necessitates a corresponding *multi-level analytical approach*, capable of capturing both vertical interactions (between levels) and horizontal dynamics (within each level). This multi-layered understanding is further supported by applied approaches that conceptualise *security culture* as the interaction between people, policies, and technology, highlighting its dynamic and adaptive nature within organisational contexts [12, pp. 19-20].

In addition, the ontological complexity of *security culture* is further shaped by the contemporary informational environment. The increasing importance of intelligence processes and knowledge management reflects broader transformations in how security-related information is collected, analysed, and interpreted within both institutional and societal contexts [18, 2011]. At the same time, the consolidation of *security culture* depends significantly on the interaction between state institutions and society, particularly through processes of education, awareness, and communication that enhance societal preparedness and coordinated responses to threats [19].

Finally, it is essential to emphasise that *security culture* is not normatively neutral. Rather, it is shaped by broader ideological and socio-political dynamics. D. Kumar demonstrates that national *security culture* is produced through the interaction between the national security state and the media industry and is structured along axes of gender, race, and class, reflecting deeper power relations embedded in contemporary societies [20, pp. 2154-2156, 2171-2172]. This perspective reveals the need to conceptualise *security culture* not only as a functional resource for enhancing societal resilience, but also as a contested and politically embedded construct, subject to processes of negotiation, inclusion, exclusion, and transformation.

In conclusion, the ontological foundations of *security culture* reveal it as a *complex, emergent, and relational phenomenon*, characterised by multidimensionality, multi-level interaction, and dynamic reproduction. Understanding this ontological structure is essential for advancing both theoretical clarity and methodological rigour, as it provides the basis for transforming *security culture* from an abstract concept into a robust analytical and empirical category.

Epistemologically, *security culture* occupies a hybrid and liminal position at the intersection of multiple theoretical traditions, reflecting both the expansion of Security Studies beyond positivist paradigms and the growing need to reconcile interpretive depth with empirical applicability. This positioning renders the concept simultaneously productive and problematic: productive because it enables interdisciplinary integration, and problematic because it generates conceptual ambiguity, methodological inconsistency, and difficulties in cumulative knowledge-building.

At a foundational level, the epistemology of *security culture* is shaped by the transition from objectivist to intersubjective understandings of *security*. Classical *positivist approaches* conceptualised security as an externally observable condition, measurable through material indicators such as military capabilities or threat distributions. In contrast, contemporary approaches, particularly those associated with the Copenhagen School, reframe security as an *intersubjective construct*, emerging from processes of meaning-making, discourse, and collective recognition [4]. Within this epistemological shift, *security culture* becomes intelligible not as a variable independent of social interpretation, but as a *constitutive dimension* of how security itself is known and enacted.

Constructivist approaches provide the primary epistemological foundation for the study of *security culture*. They emphasise that security realities are not given but socially constructed through shared meanings, identities, and norms. From this perspective, knowledge about security is inherently relational and contingent upon the interpretive frameworks of actors. *Security culture*, within a constructivist epistemology, is understood as a repository of collectively internalised meanings that shape how threats are defined, prioritised, and responded to.

Within the Copenhagen School framework, securitization is conceptualised as a speech act through which a securitizing actor constructs an issue as an existential threat to a valued referent object, thereby legitimising the adoption of extraordinary measures beyond the realm of normal politics. Importantly, *securitization* is only successful when the relevant audience accepts this framing, distinguishing between securitizing moves and actual securitization [21].

From a constructivist perspective, the concept reflects the interaction between knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural orientations, which influence both institutional responses and societal engagement with security issues. However, existing responses to emerging threats, particularly hybrid threats, remain insufficiently coherent and lack comprehensiveness, highlighting the need for a more integrated cultural and strategic approach [22, p. 70]. In this context, the development of a robust *security culture* is closely linked to the enhancement of societal resilience, as it contributes to strengthening awareness, preparedness, and the capacity to respond effectively to complex and evolving security challenges. However, while constructivism offers a solid account of how security meanings are produced, it often remains epistemologically under-specified in terms of measurement and validation. The emphasis on intersubjectivity and discourse complicates the development of standardised indicators, thereby limiting the operationalisation of *security culture* in empirical research.

Interpretivist perspectives extend constructivist insights by focusing more explicitly on language, narratives, and symbolic representations as central mechanisms of knowledge production. Within this framework, *security culture* is not merely a set of shared beliefs but *a discursively mediated phenomenon*, continuously reproduced through communication processes. The role of media and information environments becomes particularly salient in this context, because digital communication platforms has transformed the epistemic conditions under which security knowledge is produced and disseminated. Information is no longer monopolised by state institutions but circulates within complex networks, where it is subject to reinterpretation, manipulation, and contestation.

G.-D. Lupulescu emphasises the role of institutional communication and security education in shaping public awareness and strengthening *security culture*, highlighting the importance of interaction between state institutions and society [19]. Building on this perspective, *security culture* can also be understood as shaped through communicative processes that influence how security-related knowledge is interpreted and internalised. Through this lens, knowledge is not neutral but constructed, framed, and strategically deployed, often in the context of information warfare and cognitive influence operations.

The interpretivist approach thus foregrounds the *hermeneutic dimension of security culture*, emphasising understanding over explanation. Yet, its strength in capturing meaning and context is accompanied by limitations in generalisability and comparability, raising challenges for systematic empirical analysis.

In response to the limitations of purely *constructivist* and *interpretivist approaches*, a growing body of literature adopts a pragmatic epistemological orientation, seeking to translate theoretical insights into operational frameworks suitable for empirical investigation and policy application. This approach is generally characterised by an emphasis on measurement, indicators, and methodological structuring. In this regard, D. Cristea and D.-A. Dumitrescu mark an important step through the development of a national “security culture barometer”, based on survey instruments and multidimensional indicators designed to measure public perceptions, attitudes, and orientations towards security [23, pp. 133-134].

From a governance perspective, K. Koh, A.B. Ruighaver, S.B. Maynard, A. Ahmad demonstrate that security governance, through its structural, functional, and participatory mechanisms, plays a significant role in shaping organisational *security culture*, particularly by influencing responsibility, ownership, and decision-making processes [7, pp. 47-49].

In a broader security sector context, Z. Isaković reveals the importance of transparency, norms, and education in shaping *security culture*, emphasising the interaction between institutional frameworks and societal values within processes of security sector reform [16, pp. 237-241, 248].

Building on these perspectives, *security culture* can be analysed through observable organisational practices and patterns of institutional behaviour, which allows for its integration into empirically grounded and policy-relevant analytical frameworks.

Pragmatic approaches further emphasise the behavioural and organisational dimensions of *security culture*. For instance, K. Roer highlights that awareness alone is insufficient to ensure secure behaviour, arguing that *security culture* must be understood as a process that integrates knowledge, behaviour, and organisational practices [12, p. 25]. However, the pragmatic turn introduces its own epistemological tensions. The process of operationalisation often involves *reductionism*, simplifying complex and context-dependent phenomena into measurable indicators. These risks losing the richness of the concept and overlooking its interpretive and normative dimensions.

Despite these contributions, the concept of *security culture* remains complex and difficult to define, reflecting its multidimensional nature and the diversity of its applications [6, pp. 62-63; 24, pp. 47-48]. This diversity has led to variations in conceptual usage and interpretation across different studies, even when the concept is framed in relation to similar domains such as national security, societal resilience, or institutional governance. At the same time, a strong normative orientation can be observed in the literature, where *security culture* is frequently associated with democratic values, education, and societal resilience [25, pp. 43-44; 26, p. 258]. However, this normative dimension coexists with attempts to conceptualise *security culture* as an analytical framework, creating a degree of conceptual tension between descriptive and prescriptive uses of the concept.

These observations suggest the need for a more integrated epistemological approach, capable of reconciling interpretive depth with analytical rigour. In this perspective, *security culture* can be understood as a multidimensional construct that combines values, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours, while remaining open to empirical operationalisation and policy application.

In conclusion, the epistemological orientations of *security culture* reveal a concept situated at the crossroads of competing paradigms, reflecting the broader transformation of Security Studies. While this plurality enriches the analytical potential of the concept, it also necessitates greater theoretical discipline and methodological innovation. Only through epistemological clarification and integration can *security culture* evolve from a diffuse conceptual label into a coherent, cumulative, and empirically grounded field of inquiry.

3. CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE LITERATURE AND IDENTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH GAP

The existing body of literature on *security culture* reflects a significant expansion of the concept across multiple subfields of Security Studies, yet this expansion has not been accompanied by a corresponding consolidation of its epistemological and methodological foundations. Instead, the concept has evolved in a fragmented manner, marked by overlapping definitions, inconsistent analytical frameworks, and limited empirical validation.

A first major limitation concerns the absence of conceptual discipline, which has led to what Sartori famously termed *conceptual stretching*, the extension of a concept beyond its analytical capacity [27, p. 1034]. The conceptual ambiguity surrounding *security culture* can be interpreted through *conceptual stretching*, whereby the expansion of a concept's applicability leads to a loss of analytical precision.

This dynamic is particularly evident in contemporary Security Studies, where *security culture* is applied across multiple levels without sufficient conceptual delimitation. In the context of *security culture*, this is evident in the tendency to subsume a wide range of phenomena, ranging from institutional practices to societal attitudes and individual perceptions, under a single conceptual umbrella. While such inclusiveness enhances descriptive richness, it undermines analytical precision and renders the concept increasingly difficult to operationalise.

Closely related to this issue is the persistent conflation between *security culture* and adjacent constructs, particularly *strategic culture, political culture,* and *societal security*. The debate on *strategic culture* is shaped by a fundamental epistemological tension between the analytical-positivist approach of A.I. Johnston and the contextual-constructivist perspective of C.S. Gray, with direct implications for understanding *security culture*. A.I. Johnston conceptualises *strategic culture* as an integrated system of symbols generating stable, historically embedded strategic preferences that can be empirically tested through their impact on behaviour [28, pp. 36-39, 46-47]. In contrast, C.S. Gray rejects the separation between culture and behaviour, arguing that *strategic culture* provides context rather than causal explanation, as "the traffic between ideas and behaviour is continuous" and strategic actors are inherently shaped by cultural frameworks [29, pp. 49, 53, 62].

This divergence can be bridged through the constructivist framework of B. Buzan, O, Wæver, and J. de Wilde, who conceptualise security as a socially constructed and discursively produced phenomenon, emerging through processes of securitisation [4, pp. 21-24].

Within this perspective, *security culture* can be understood as an intermediate epistemic layer that links discursive constructions of security with patterns of strategic behaviour. Thus, *security culture* integrates cognitive, normative, and behavioural dimensions, mediating between societal perceptions and institutional responses.

This reconceptualisation preserves A.I. Johnston's analytical rigour while incorporating C.S. Gray's emphasis on contextual embeddedness, positioning *security culture* as a multidimensional construct that is both analytically operationalisable and socially constitutive.

Political culture, as conceptualised by G. Almond and S. Verba, refers to a structured set of orientations toward political objects and processes, encompassing cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions that shape how individuals perceive, interpret, and engage with political systems [30, pp. 12-15]. Within this framework, *political culture* functions as a crucial intermediary between individual attitudes and systemic structures, linking micro-level perceptions with macro-level political processes.

This perspective is particularly relevant for the conceptualisation of *security culture*, as it reveals the role of shared orientations, rather than merely formal institutions, in shaping collective responses to complex challenges. While *political culture* addresses general attitudes toward authority, governance, and participation, *security culture* can be understood as a more specific configuration of these orientations, focused on the perception of threats and the legitimacy of security-related practices. Building on these perspectives, it can be argued that the analytical boundaries between these concepts are not always clearly delineated in contemporary research, particularly when extending the focus from elite-level strategic thinking to broader societal processes. In this context, *security culture* may be interpreted as intersecting with *political culture*, while retaining a distinct focus on perceptions of threats and responses to them.

A further limitation arises from the predominant reliance on *constructivist* and *interpretivist paradigms* which, although essential for understanding the social construction of security, often provide limited methodological guidance for systematic empirical validation. The Copenhagen School, in particular, makes a foundational contribution by conceptualising security as a socially constructed and discursively produced phenomenon. As B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. de Wilde argue, security is constituted through processes of securitization, whereby issues are framed as existential threats and accepted by a relevant audience, thus becoming "security" through intersubjective recognition [4, pp. 24-25]. This perspective fundamentally shifts the analytical focus from objective threats to the processes through which threats are constructed and legitimised. However, while highly valuable at the conceptual level, this approach offers limited tools for measuring, comparing, or operationalising securitization processes across different empirical contexts.

Similarly, M. Kaldor's work on contemporary conflict provides an important macro-level reinterpretation of security by analysing "new wars" as socially embedded, transnational, and historically situated phenomena characterised by the erosion of traditional distinctions between internal and external security, as well as between state and non-state actors [10, pp. 2-7, 95-102]. Her broader reflections on global security further suggest the emergence of plural and overlapping "security cultures" shaped by globalisation and networked forms of violence. While this perspective significantly enriches the understanding of security as a socially embedded and evolving domain, it remains conceptually expansive and only partially operationalised for empirical analysis.

In response to these limitations, a growing body of literature has sought to operationalise *security culture*, particularly within organisational and national frameworks.

For example, K. Koh, A.B. Ruighaver, S.B. Maynard, A. Ahmad conceptualise *security culture* in relation to governance structures, organisational policies, and compliance mechanisms, emphasising the role of management systems in shaping security behaviour [7, pp. 48-50]. Similarly, J.Piwowarski proposes a structured understanding of *security culture* grounded in knowledge, education, and practical application, highlighting the importance of training and institutional learning processes [15, pp. 11-13]. More recently, certain scholars advance a multidimensional framework integrating cognitive, normative, and behavioural components, thereby attempting to bridge the gap between conceptual abstraction and empirical applicability [5, pp. 126-130].

Despite these important contributions, the field remains characterised by a lack of standardised indicators and measurement instruments, which limits both comparability across cases and the accumulation of systematic empirical knowledge. Consequently, *security culture* continues to oscillate between a rich conceptual construct and an under-operationalised analytical category.

Moreover, the literature reveals a persistent tension between normative and analytical uses of the concept of *security culture*. In a number of policy-oriented contributions, *security culture* is framed primarily in normative terms, being associated with democratic values, civic responsibility, and the development of societal resilience [25, pp. 42-44; 26, pp. 258-259]. This orientation emphasises the role of education, public awareness, and value internalisation in strengthening the relationship between citizens and the security system. While such a perspective is highly relevant from a policy standpoint, it may blur the distinction between descriptive analysis and prescriptive objectives, thereby reducing the analytical precision of the concept.

Conversely, more strictly analytical approaches tend to abstract *security culture* from its normative foundations, focusing on measurable attitudes and behaviours while paying less attention to issues of legitimacy, trust, and *value-based orientation.*

A further limitation concerns the insufficient integration of analytical levels. Existing studies frequently examine *security culture* at a single level, whether individual, organisational, or national, without adequately capturing the interactions between these dimensions. This fragmentation is particularly visible in empirical research, where survey-based analyses of public perceptions [14, pp. 150-152] coexist with institutional and theoretical approaches, yet are rarely integrated within a coherent multi-level framework. As a result, the cumulative development of knowledge remains limited, and the explanatory potential of the concept is only partially realised.

Despite the growing prominence of *security culture* in both academic and policy-oriented discourse, the literature reveals a persistent imbalance between conceptual expansion and analytical consolidation. A similar concern has been raised more broadly in International Relations, where conceptual developments have often outpaced the construction of historically integrated analytical frameworks [3, pp. 18-22]. In the case of *security culture*, the concept has been widely applied to explain phenomena such as hybrid threats and societal resilience, yet its theoretical foundations remain insufficiently stabilised and its methodological applications unevenly developed.

A primary gap concerns the fragmented epistemological positioning of *security culture*. Existing approaches tend to operate within distinct paradigmatic traditions rather than within a coherent synthesis. Constructivist scholarship, for example, conceptualises security as an intersubjectively constituted phenomenon emerging through processes of securitisation and audience acceptance [4, pp. 24-25]. While this perspective provides a robust account of how meanings and identities shape threat perception, it offers limited guidance for systematic empirical operationalisation.

Interpretive approaches extend this line of inquiry by emphasising discourse, communication, and the role of institutional interaction in shaping public understanding of security [19, pp. 88-92]. However, these contributions remain primarily normative and descriptive, with limited standardisation of analytical tools. Conversely, more pragmatic approaches seek to operationalise *security culture* by translating it into measurable components. In this regard, A. Lesenciuc and M. Cozmanciuc conceptualise *security culture* as a composite of values, norms, attitudes, and actions, thereby facilitating its transformation into an empirical analytical variable [5, pp. 124-126].

Despite these advances, the coexistence of divergent approaches has limited the accumulation of systematic knowledge. Differences in conceptualisation and methodology constrain comparability across studies and reduce the generalisability of findings. Against this background, the present study advances an integrative epistemological perspective that seeks to reconcile the constructivist emphasis on intersubjective meaning, the interpretive focus on discourse and context, and the pragmatic requirement for empirical measurability. Such an approach enables *security culture* to be conceptualised simultaneously as a constitutive framework shaping the understanding of security and as an analytical construct suitable for empirical investigation.

A second major gap relates to the insufficient conceptual delimitation of *security culture*, which risks diluting its analytical value. In the literature, *security culture* is frequently discussed in close proximity to related constructs such as *strategic culture*, *political culture*, or *societal security*, reflecting their shared concern with values, perceptions, and patterns of behaviour.

For instance, *strategic culture* has been defined in terms of historically embedded ideas, attitudes, and preferred modes of action shaping state behaviour [29, pp. 49-51], while *political culture* refers to a system of cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientations linking individuals to political structures [30, pp. 13-15]. This conceptual proximity, while theoretically productive, may generate analytical ambiguity when distinctions are not explicitly clarified.

This situation can be interpreted through G. Sartori's notion of "conceptual stretching", whereby the expansion of a concept's scope reduces its analytical precision [27, pp. 1033-1035]. In the case of *security culture*, the absence of clear delimitations may hinder the identification of specific explanatory mechanisms and encourage the use of the concept in a broad, sometimes unspecified manner. Rather than attributing this directly to individual studies, it reflects a more general challenge associated with emerging and multidimensional concepts.

The present study addresses this gap by proposing a structured conceptual delimitation grounded in functional differentiation, level-of-analysis specification, and dimensional structuring. In this framework, *security culture* is not treated as an umbrella concept, but as a distinct integrative construct linking cognitive, normative, institutional, and behavioural dimensions, while maintaining clear analytical boundaries in relation to adjacent concepts.

A third gap concerns the limited operationalisation of *security culture*, which constrains its use as an empirically testable variable. Existing contributions have advanced partial frameworks within specific contexts. For example, K. Koh, A.B. Ruighaver, S.B. Maynard, A. Ahmad analyse *security culture* in relation to organisational governance mechanisms and management practices that shape security behaviour [7, pp. 48-50]. Similarly, J. Piwowarski emphasises the role of knowledge, education, and practice in the development of *security culture*, highlighting the importance of training and institutional learning processes [15, pp. 11-13].

However, these approaches remain context-specific and do not provide a standardised set of indicators capable of capturing the multidimensional nature of *security culture* across different analytical levels. This limitation is particularly evident in comparative and longitudinal research, where the absence of consistent metrics restricts cross-case analysis and the accumulation of empirical knowledge. Moreover, many measurement attempts focus on single dimensions, such as awareness or attitudes, without fully accounting for the interaction between cognitive, normative, institutional, and behavioural components.

The present study contributes to addressing this gap by advancing a multidimensional operationalisation framework that defines distinct yet interrelated dimensions, proposes preliminary indicators for each dimension, and emphasises the dynamic interaction between them. Importantly, this framework conceptualises *security culture* as a *process-oriented construct*, capturing both structural conditions and adaptive dynamics. Such an approach enables the integration of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, thereby enhancing both analytical validity and explanatory depth.

A fourth critical gap concerns the lack of multi-level integration in the study of *security culture*. Although the concept is applied at individual, organisational, and societal levels, these dimensions are rarely analysed in an interconnected manner, limiting understanding of how dynamics at one level influence others. This study addresses this limitation by proposing a *multi-level framework* linking individual cognition, institutional practices, and societal norms, thereby conceptualising *security culture* as an integrated system of interactions.

Overall, the literature reflects a broader structural issue: the absence of a coherent analytical paradigm. In response, this study provides both conceptual clarification and a multidimensional operationalisation framework, positioning *security culture* as a distinct and empirically applicable construct within Security Studies.

4. RECONCEPTUALISING SECURITY CULTURE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical and epistemological limitations identified above call for a systematic reconceptualisation of *security culture* that reconciles theoretical depth with empirical applicability. In response, the present study advances a multidimensional framework that conceptualises *security culture* as an integrated system of cognitive, normative, institutional, and behavioural dimensions, operating dynamically across multiple levels of analysis.

This framework is grounded in the constructivist understanding of security as an intersubjective process, whereby security is constituted through processes of securitisation and audience acceptance [4, pp. 24-25]. It also draws on organisational and empirical approaches that emphasise the role of knowledge, norms, and practices in shaping security-related behaviour. For example, J. Piwowarski conceptualises *security culture* in terms of knowledge, education, and practice, highlighting the importance of learning processes in its development [15, pp. 11-13]. Similarly, A. Lesenciuc and M. Cozmanciuc define *security culture* as a composite of values, norms, attitudes, and actions, thereby enabling its transformation into an empirically relevant analytical construct [5, pp. 124-126].

Building on these contributions, the proposed framework extends existing approaches by introducing a relational and operationalisable structure that captures the interaction between multiple dimensions and levels.

Rather than treating *security culture* as a static attribute, it is conceptualised as a dynamic configuration of interdependent components that jointly shape adaptive responses to security challenges.

This systemic perspective is consistent with broader approaches in International Relations that emphasise the interaction between units, structures, and processes within complex social systems [3, pp. 18-22]. In this sense, *security culture* can be understood as an integrative framework linking perception, normativity, institutionalisation, and behaviour within a coherent analytical model.

The *cognitive dimension* represents the epistemic core of *security culture*, encompassing knowledge, awareness, perception, and interpretation of security threats. It reflects the degree to which individuals and societies are able to recognise, process, and critically evaluate information related to risks and vulnerabilities. This dimension is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary information environments characterised by disinformation, cognitive warfare, and informational overload. The cognitive dimension of *security culture* becomes particularly salient in this context, as it reflects the ways in which individuals perceive, interpret, and evaluate security risks. As revealed by I. Chiru, perceptions of risk are unevenly distributed across society, often generating discrepancies between institutional assessments and public understanding, which can affect the overall effectiveness of security policies [13, p. 60].

From an operational perspective, the *cognitive dimension* includes threat awareness, information literacy, critical thinking and resistance to manipulation, perception of institutional credibility. Importantly, this dimension functions as a *filtering mechanism*, mediating the relationship between objective threats and subjective responses.

Without a sufficiently developed cognitive dimension, other components of *security culture* cannot function effectively.

The *normative dimension* refers to the system of values, beliefs, and legitimacy frameworks that guide attitudes toward security and shape the acceptance of security-related policies. It reflects the extent to which security practices are aligned with broader societal norms, including democratic principles, human rights, and rule of law. The classical tension between national security and individual freedom is already evident in H. Lasswell's work, where he emphasises the need to maintain security with a "minimum sacrifice of individual freedoms" [2, p. 288)], remains central to this dimension. A mature *security culture* requires not only awareness of threats but also a normative consensus regarding appropriate responses, balancing effectiveness with legitimacy.

Contemporary studies underline the importance of the *normative dimension* in shaping the relationship between citizens and the security system, particularly through its role in supporting public trust, legitimising security measures, and fostering civic responsibility. In this regard, *security culture* is closely linked to the internalisation of values through education, socialisation, and public communication processes. For instance, L. Curoș emphasises that the development of *security culture* is fundamentally dependent on educational processes that transmit values, norms, and attitudes necessary for responsible participation in the security domain [25, pp. 42-44]. Similarly, S. Sprincean reveals that *security culture* reflects a broader societal orientation grounded in shared values, responsibility, and collective engagement, particularly in the context of contemporary challenges [26, pp. 258-259]. From a critical perspective, D. Kumar demonstrates that *security-related discourses* and *practices* are not normatively neutral but are shaped by broader socio-political dynamics, including structures of power, identity, and inequality [20, pp. 2154-2156, 2171-2172]. This perspective suggests that the normative dimension of *security culture* cannot be reduced to a set of universally accepted values but must be understood as socially constructed and context-dependent.

Thus, the *normative dimension functions* as the axiological foundation of *security culture*, linking values and legitimacy with patterns of behaviour and shaping both institutional practices and societal responses to security challenges.

The *institutional dimension* encompasses the formal and informal structures through which security is governed, organised, and implemented. It includes legal frameworks, policy instruments, organisational routines, and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms. From an analytical standpoint, institutions play a dual role: they codify and stabilise security norms, translating them into policies and procedures and they shape behaviour and expectations, influencing how individuals and organisations respond to security challenges.

K. Koh, A.B. Ruighaver, S.B. Maynard, A. Ahmad emphasise that governance structures have a direct impact on organisational *security culture*, particularly in terms of compliance and risk management [7, p. 49]. Similarly, Z. Isaković identifies transparency and accountability as key institutional components of a functional *security culture*, especially in post-transition contexts [16, p. 240]. Within this framework, the institutional dimension includes strategic and legal frameworks, organisational capacity and coordination, transparency and accountability mechanisms, policy coherence and adaptability. The effectiveness of this dimension is contingent upon its alignment with the cognitive and normative dimensions. Institutional arrangements that lack societal legitimacy or fail to reflect public perceptions are likely to generate resistance or inefficiency.

The *behavioural dimension* represents the manifestation of *security culture* in terms of actions, practices, and patterns of conduct. It includes both individual and collective behaviour, ranging from compliance with regulations to proactive engagement in security-related activities. J. Piwowarski conceptualises behaviour as the outcome of the interaction between knowledge and values, emphasising its role as the practical expression of *security culture* [15, p. 12]. One of the challenges in operationalising *security culture* lies in bridging the gap between awareness and behaviour. As K. Roer demonstrates, knowledge of security risks does not automatically translate into behavioural change, highlighting the need for integrated approaches that combine education, policy enforcement, and technological support [12].

This dimension encompasses compliance with security norms and regulations, civic participation and engagement, adaptive behaviour in crisis situations, institutional responsiveness and performance. From an analytical perspective, the behavioural dimension serves as the *empirical interface* of the framework, providing measurable indicators of the extent to which *security culture* is internalised and operationalised. This multidimensional framework is consistent with applied models that conceptualise *security culture* as the interaction between people, policies, and technology, reflecting the interdependence between cognitive, normative, institutional, and behavioural dimensions [12, pp. 19-20].

A key feature of the proposed framework is the interaction between its core dimensions, cognitive, normative, institutional, and behavioural, which function as an integrated system rather than independent variables. Changes in one dimension (e.g., threat perception) influence others (e.g., legitimacy, institutional responses, behaviour), reflecting a non-linear and adaptive logic. The framework is also multi-level, linking individual, organisational, and societal dimensions within a unified model, thereby addressing the fragmentation of existing approaches. Overall, it provides a clear conceptual structure, supports operationalisation through measurable dimensions, and enables the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods, enhancing both analytical coherence and policy relevance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The concept of *security culture* occupies a paradoxical position within contemporary Security Studies: it is simultaneously central to understanding current security dynamics and insufficiently consolidated as an analytical category. The proliferation of its usage across academic and policy-oriented discourse has not been accompanied by a corresponding clarification of its epistemological status, resulting in a concept that is often invoked but rarely rigorously defined or operationalised.

One of the most significant conclusions is that the core difficulty does not lie in the relevance of *security culture*, but in the absence of conceptual discipline governing its use. The tendency to extend the concept across multiple domains, ranging from institutional governance to societal attitudes and individual perceptions, has generated analytical ambiguity and reduced explanatory precision. This confirms that *security culture*, in its current form, risks functioning as an inclusive but weakly differentiated category unless its boundaries are explicitly defined and theoretically grounded. At the same time, the fragmentation of epistemological approaches constitutes a major obstacle to the development of cumulative knowledge. Constructivist and interpretivist perspectives have provided essential insights into the intersubjective and discursive nature of security, while pragmatic approaches have attempted to introduce empirical measurability.

However, the lack of integration between these paradigms has resulted in parallel strands of research that rarely converge into a coherent analytical framework. This fragmentation limits both comparability across studies and the potential for theory-building.

Against this background, a key conclusion is that *security culture* must be reconceptualised as a multidimensional and multi-level construct, capable of bridging these epistemological divides. The proposed framework addresses this requirement by structuring *security culture* around four interrelated dimensions such as cognitive, normative, institutional, and behavioural, while simultaneously integrating micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis. This dual structuring represents a necessary condition for restoring analytical clarity without reducing the complexity of the concept.

Equally important is the recognition that *security culture* cannot be adequately understood through linear or static models. The findings support a dynamic and systemic interpretation, in which interactions between dimensions generate feedback effects that shape both perception and action. This perspective reflects the realities of contemporary security environments, where adaptive responses depend on the continuous interaction between knowledge, values, institutional arrangements, and behavioural practices. In this sense, *security culture* emerges not merely as a descriptive framework, but as a process through which societies interpret and manage insecurity.

From a methodological standpoint, the future relevance of the concept depends on its operationalisation and without the development of measurable dimensions and indicators, *security culture* will remain confined to normative or descriptive use. The framework advanced here creates the premises for such operationalisation, allowing the concept to be integrated into empirical research designs and comparative analyses. This constitutes an essential step toward transforming *security culture* into a testable and policy-relevant variable.

Finally, the research reveals the broader implications of *security culture* for understanding contemporary security challenges. In an environment shaped by hybrid threats, cognitive warfare, and informational disruption, the capacity of societies to interpret, internalise, and respond to security risks becomes a critical determinant of resilience.

Security culture, therefore, should not be treated as a peripheral or auxiliary concept, but as a central component of the analytical toolkit required to understand the evolving nature of security.

In conclusion, the advancement of *security culture* as a field of inquiry depends on a shift from conceptual expansion toward epistemological integration and methodological rigour. Only through such a transition can the concept fulfil its potential as a coherent analytical category capable of supporting both theoretical development and empirical investigation within contemporary Security Studies.

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