In international assemblies and conferences, decision-makers belong to different national or regional cultures which can influence the path to decisions and contribute to the determination of the agenda. Despite international and/or professional training and influence, it does not seem probable that individuals can completely rise above their culture and always act in a ‘cosmopolitan’ way (Salacuse 1993: 208). It is thus important to shed some light on the cultural framework of negotiations. The culture and style of the negotiator can have a positive or negative effect on the outcome of the negotiation process.

The role of culture in international negotiations is treated as controversial in the negotiation literature. On the one hand, there is the argument, that cultural factors have an important influence on the negotiation process and explain among other things the outcome of negotiations. On the other hand, there is the argument that national cultures do not matter very much at all, because there exists a professional international negotiation culture that dominates and makes differences between national cultures obsolete.

4.1 Negotiation style and negotiation culture

Different cultural patterns can be identified under the broad headings of Anglo-Saxon, Japanese, Arab, Latin/Roman, Slavic, Christian-Orthodox, Teutonic, etc. In addition to this, Huntington’s well-known distinction between civilizations recognizes a Western, Confucian,
Japanese, Islamic, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, African and a Hindu civilization.

What is understood by term culture? The French writer and politician Edouard Herriot has defined culture as that which remains when everything else has been forgotten. The paradox inherent in this statement grasps an important characteristic of culture, namely the fact that it is not a material entity but rather a way of thinking and acting that stems from the unconscious. Culture can be defined as ‘a set of shared and enduring meanings, values, and beliefs that characterize national, ethnic, or other groups and orient their behavior’ (Faure and Rubin 1993).

Intercultural negotiations are determined to a certain degree by the cultural context of the negotiating parties. In politics, mutual understanding or misunderstanding depends to a large extent on the knowledge about the ways of thinking and forms of expression of the opposing party – or, as Jönsson has claimed, ‘shared meaning, which is a prerequisite for effective communication, presupposes some common cultural code or at least sensitivity to cultural divergences’ (Jönsson 1990: 47). Language is one important medium of communication, a ‘system of signs’ (Hitz 1977: 41). The misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the intentions of the other party can have far-reaching consequences. The Vienna conference with Kennedy and Khrushchev in 1961 is an example of misinterpretation as a result of the different political cultures in each country, which led to incorrect conclusions about the intentions of both sides. The Anglo-Saxon understatement displayed by Kennedy was interpreted as weakness by the impulsive and direct Khrushchev and, finally, led the Soviet leader to embark on the Cuban adventure of 1962.

Negotiators are, in behaviour and expression, captives of their culture and mentality. National stereotypes, such as those of an American or an Italian, can be identified.

The term political culture refers mainly to the perception of the political system and the attitudes towards it on the part of its citizens and thus refers to the subjective dimensions of a political system’s social foundations. But political culture includes the behavior of political actors among themselves as well. For example, coalitions of political parties belong to the political culture of Germany and Italy, but are unknown in the United Kingdom. As a result, British politicians encounter more problems reaching agreements with their partners in the EU than German or Italian politicians.

The history of political theory consistently points out the fact that the cohesion of a polity requires something other than simply