

A Comprehensive Analysis of Narratives within NATO's Doctrines

Dominic Saari, Teemu Häkkinen and Panu Moilanen

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

dobejosa@jyu.fi

teemu.hakkinen@jyu.fi

panu.moilanen@jyu.fi

Abstract:The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine reshaped global security norms, challenging the West with a strategy known as hybrid warfare. Rooted in Russia's military doctrine, this approach integrates both military and non-military means, labelled hybrid warfare in the West and non-linear warfare in Russia. Prioritizing psychological and cognitive influence, the New Generation Warfare emphasizes soft power. NATO responded by investing in strategic communications and exploring cognitive warfare as a potential sixth domain of war. Adversaries use intricate methods to manipulate civilian cognitive processes, relying on persuasive narratives. Like business corporations, nation-states now craft strategic narratives to shape political and military thinking, employing various narrative levels in information and cognitive warfare, including counter-narratives against hostile stories. This article provides a comprehensive review of the different perspectives on the role of narratives within defence and security strategies and doctrines of NATO. The qualitative methodology employed in this study focuses on understanding how narratives are perceived within the strategies of the alliance. The approach involves a comprehensive examination and comparison of narrative practices to uncover the evolution of NATO's narrative concepts. The sources for this study encompass a range of materials, including official NATO strategy and doctrine papers. This article reveals that, over the period spanning from the 2003 to 2024, narratives have gained increasing significance for NATO. Initially regarded merely as a means to depict events in a preferred manner, narratives have evolved to play a pivotal role in shaping the alliance's strategy. They have transcended their initial role, now exerting influence on military operations and taking precedence at every level of NATO, from headquarters to the boots on the ground. It is highlighted in this article that NATO endeavours to align its actions with its values, aiming to establish credibility and legitimacy. NATO perceives a robust, multi-levelled, and ever-evolving narrative as an effective safeguard against hostile information and cognitive warfare.

Key Words: Information Warfare, NATO, Strategic Narratives, Narrative Strategies, Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

Traditionally, narratives served as a way to tell stories. In modern times, they are acknowledged as a crucial aspect of warfare, representing the transformation of the narrative concept into a powerful tool that profoundly impacts the surrounding world. Conflict-related narratives are now a key component in war, shifting the battleground into the cognitive domain (Kvernbekk & Bøe-Hansen 2017).

In 2013, the Russian Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov (2013) held his famous speech, in which he described the changes in contemporary warfare. The main message of Gerasimov was that “the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness (...).” In the model presented by Gerasimov, the only set of operations spanning over all stages of military conflict, are information operations. Later Gerasimov (2016, 20) also referred to hybrid methods stating them to include e.g. “informational and psychological influence”. While the cognitive dimension was embraced in Russian thinking, NATO was compelled to adapt as well. NATO echoed this by investing heavily in strategic communications and the research of cognitive warfare. As part of NATO's Warfare Development Agenda, the organization's Warfare Development Imperative is set to publish its Cognitive Warfare Concept later in 2024 (NATO, 2024).

Dr. Andreas Krieg (2023) defines narratives as stories that structure realities, shape identity, and provide meaning. He emphasizes their pivotal role in fostering social cohesion and consensus. Environmental scientist Braden Allenby (2017) extends this, asserting narratives as versatile and widely adaptable strategic tools. Allenby underscores their flexibility as strategic instruments applicable in various contexts, highlighting the adaptability of those who use them by integrating knowledge from diverse fields. Going beyond storytelling, Allenby stresses the power of narratives as influential frameworks shaping identities, meaning, and exercising manipulative influence over individuals. Narrative strategist Ajit Maan (2018) takes it further, stating, “Through narrative, we co-construct our personal and cultural identities. Ideas and beliefs result from those identities, and actions follow.”

This research article aims to reveal the role of narrative in the thinking of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As a prominent military alliance, NATO holds a leading position in the Western context, forming a coalition where nations mutually defend each other, serving as a significant deterrent against foreign aggression

toward any member state. Notably, NATO functions as a nuclear alliance with the capacity to undertake diverse missions under the overarching themes of peace and security.

Information plays a crucial role in NATO operations, and our empirical section will explore this aspect. However, understanding how NATO operates, particularly in the cognitive domain and the role of narratives, remains partially unclear. This poses a research problem: what is the role of narratives in NATO's thinking, especially at the doctrinal level, and what insights can a better understanding provide regarding their importance in modern military and strategic thinking? This article focuses on NATO as a single entity, recognizing the varied interests of other actors within the organization. Our goal is to outline NATO's thinking and how narratives are portrayed in different doctrines.

We will outline our research approach, present empirical analysis findings, and conclude with a comprehensive discussion and conclusion.

2. Methods and Selected Sources

To delve into the comprehension of narratives within the alliance, this article adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on textual analysis of sources and contextualizing our findings. Our methodology draws on an understanding of history, where the significance of narratives and storytelling has traditionally played a pivotal role, aligning with an empiricist approach (Munslow 2007). Viewing NATO as an entity, we recognize the role of narratives as providing insight into the historical thinking within the organization or the lack thereof. The portrayal of narratives, both as contemporary and historical phenomena, sheds light on the organization and offers clues about potential future directions.

We utilized official NATO reports, toolkits, and strategy papers, primarily sourced from NATO's online archives. After an extensive search, we carefully selected 32 documents, with eleven identified as crucial for this article's context. Covering the period from 2003 to 2024, these documents highlight a notable shift in NATO's attention towards narratives. While earlier psychological operations doctrines vaguely mention stories and persuasion, they lack additional context, definitions, or methods.

After compiling data, we employed qualitative analysis software, specifically Atlas.ti, for coding and categorizing our findings using keywords such as "narrative" and "story." The categories—narrative as a tool, NATO's brand building and storytelling, and narratives as part of military operations leadership—were chosen based on the context of the quote. These categories summarize key themes present in the empirical sources and are grounded in empiricism. This method facilitated the precise identification of patterns, allowing us to understand how various NATO doctrine and policy papers conceptualize the narrative concept.

The research reveals a clear evolution of this concept throughout modern times, providing a historical understanding of the role of narrative in NATO thinking with both strategic and operational implications. We discuss its significance for the organization and potential implications for the future.

3. NATO and the Emergence of the Cognitive Domain

The role of narratives in the history of warfare is intertwined with long-term trends, where the dissemination of information has played a crucial role in various war-related activities. This includes maintaining or undermining morale and informing the public about war-related events and activities. Particularly since the First World War, propaganda has held a key position, connecting modern advertising and information dissemination to purposeful efforts in shaping the ideas and understanding of target audiences (Taylor 2003; Jowett & O'Donnell 2012).

Since the Gulf War and the emergence of the "information war", Western thinking has focused on waging war based on information dominance. This approach stems from the changing nature of international crises, shifting from inter-state wars to more intra-state conflicts. The need to revise doctrines related to defence arises as more powerful and globalized communication means become ever-present on the battlefield (Taylor 2003, 298-314).

In the early 2000s, as NATO's attention turned to the Middle East and the war on terror, member states, particularly the United States, re-evaluated psychological warfare capabilities and strategies. However, in a post-Cold War political environment, Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) faced criticism for being perceived as a "black art" focused solely on lies and deception (Collins 2002). In an attempt to rebrand PSYOPS, terms like information campaigns and influence operations took the centre stage. The U.S., for instance, introduced the

concept of Military Information Support Operations (MISO) (JCS JP 3-13.2). Despite its tarnished reputation, PSYOPS would still have its place within NATO to this very day. In NATO's Military Policy on Psychological Operations, PSYOPS were defined as planned activities using communication methods to influence approved audiences, shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour to achieve political and military objectives. In 2007 NATO published its Allied Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations (AJP-3.10.1(A)). Here, Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) were viewed as a component of a broader Information Operations (INFO OPS/IO), described as strategic actions to influence adversaries and approved parties in line with Alliance objectives by manipulating information, processes, and systems, while safeguarding one's own interests. (AJP-3.10.1(A) 2007). Despite attempts to clarify, more confusion followed as, in US military thinking, INFO OPS and PSYOPS were often at odds, leading to overlapping responsibilities and significant confusion (Munoz, 2012).

Symbolizing the shift in NATO's attention, the 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration called for appropriate, timely, accurate, and responsive communication regarding NATO's policies and engagement in international operations (Bucharest Summit Declaration 2008). This sentiment was reiterated in the Strasbourg / Kehl Summit Declaration the following year, emphasizing the need for better strategic communication (Strasbourg / Kehl Summit Declaration 2009). In 2009 NATO defined strategic communication as a coordinated use of all NATO's communications capabilities such as Public Diplomacy and Affairs, IO and PSYOPS in order to advance NATO's interests (NATO Strategic Communications Policy 2009). In the same year, NATO also published its Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations, indicating the rising understanding of the new threat (AJP-3.10 2009).

For NATO, another watershed moment occurred in 2014 following Russia's intense hybrid warfare against Ukraine, especially after the Euromaidan Revolution. During the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the alliance committed to countering hybrid threats and building resilience (Warsaw Summit Communiqué 2016). Additionally, Russian disinformation campaigns played a role in popularizing the term "information warfare" as we know it in the West (Giles 2016). In the Brussels Summit of 2021, these disinformation campaigns were singled out as one of the main Russian hybrid actions against NATO (Brussels Summit Communiqué 2021).

In the following years within NATO, concerns about cognitive threats led to the emergence of the concept of cognitive warfare in 2020 (Du Cluzel 2020). This concept has since been actively developed by NATO-backed scientists and military personnel, with the aim of publishing it in 2024 (NATO 2024). According to NATO cognitive warfare blends cyber, information, psychological, and social engineering to influence, protect, or disrupt cognition for strategic advantage. It targets rationality, exploits vulnerabilities, and weakens defences, shaping perceptions and behaviours at individual, group, and societal levels (NATO 2023,2024; Bernal et al 2020; Claverie & du Cluzel 2022)).

4. Empirical Findings

4.1 Crafting a NATO Story

Multiple earlier NATO papers underscore the significance of "telling the NATO story". In 2011, NATO's Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) highlighted that narrating and showcasing the NATO story is a key mission, providing guidance to practitioners on imagery and platforms for effective message dissemination (NATO Military Public Affairs Policy 2011). In 2017, NATO's Brand Guide identified the alliance's most crucial challenge as establishing an emotional bond with unfamiliar citizens, conveying its identity, purpose, and significance (NATO Brand Guide 2017). The guide outlined a clear brand promise—NATO guarantees freedom and security—integrated into external communications to evoke desired emotions and understanding about the organization. The brand narrative unfolds in three key chapters—political, military, and change—with the overarching goal of strengthening the grand narrative. In the political chapter, there is a commitment to cooperative efforts aimed at bolstering security through consensus decision-making and advocating for the crucial role of women in peace and security. The Military chapter highlights NATO's formidable military capabilities, placing a strong emphasis on the dedication to safeguarding civilians, particularly through the application of NATO's Article 5. Finally, the Change chapter assures a commitment to innovation, adaptation, and scientific advancements. The storytelling objective is to build legitimacy and showcase shared values, referencing NATO's history and core principles established in The North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 (NATO Brand Guide 2017; The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949; AJP-10, 2023).

Published in 2023, NATO's official Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications reinforces the idea, that The North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 serves as a core tenet of NATO's institutional narrative (AJP-10, 2023). All NATO activities, including public affairs, strategic communications, psychological operations, information

operations, and kinetic military actions, are grounded in this narrative, aiming to provide meaning and unify the Alliance under a clear, easily understandable narrative. This institutional or grand narrative not only serves as a tool for building support and legitimacy but is also viewed as a defensive asset against hostile information operations, disinformation, and propaganda (NATO FFAO 2018). Within the alliance, there is a concern that failing to convey NATO's story effectively could leave room for others to shape the narrative, posing a potential threat to the alliance's brand (NATO Brand Guide 2017).

4.2 Towards a Unified Approach

Despite its growing importance, the concept of narratives was initially unclear within NATO and its member states. In 2014, the Allied Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations provided one of the earliest clear definitions of narratives, stating it as "the translation of an organization's mandate and vision into a fundamental persistent story of who the organization is, what its guiding principles are, and what it aspires to achieve" (AJP 3.10.1). To ensure a unified approach, an agreed-upon definition was officially approved in 2020 and incorporated into the NATO Terminology: "A spoken or written account of events and information arranged in a logical sequence to influence the behaviour of a target audience" (NATOTerm).

According to NATO StratCom, narratives convey the purpose and desired outcomes of activities, fostering understanding, support, and legitimacy. These brief and memorable story arcs help contextualize strategic planning, enhance organizational cohesion, and enable culturally relevant communication to reach target audiences and promote objectives (AJP-10 2023). NATO Counter-Insurgency Doctrines state that narrative is the central mechanism through which ideologies are mobilized and expressed (AJP-3.4.4 2011; AJP-3.27 2023).

After the general approval of the concept, NATO delved deeper into its understanding. The terminology evolved, unifying terms like 'grand narrative,' 'master narrative,' and 'brand narrative' under the term 'institutional narrative' after 2020. In 2023, NATO StratCom divided the narrative into three levels (AJP-10 2023). The first is the institutional narrative, which naturally forms during an entity's establishment and emerges implicitly through words, actions, and communication within the information environment. NATO roots its core institutional narrative in the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, projecting itself as a democratic multinational alliance with a strong capability to protect its borders. According to StratCom, institutional narratives are enduring but may evolve based on the organization and the operational environment (AJP-10 2023). The 2022 Allied Joint Doctrine described institutional narratives as enduring narratives supporting enduring campaigns, promoting predictability and consistency in the organization's actions (AJP-01 2022). NATO's institutional narrative, outlined in four key building blocks, signals dedication to collective defence, commitment to cooperative security and stability, and showcases solidarity among member states and shared values (AJP-01 2022). The institutional narrative communicates the NATO story and why NATO does what it does.

Below the institutional level are strategic narratives, defined by NATO StratCom as the means to reveal an organization's reasoning behind its actions and strategic objectives. Unlike institutional narratives that develop naturally, strategic narratives are deliberately crafted and must be driven from the top, executed by commanders on all levels of mission command (AJP-10, 2023). Within NATO, strategic narratives are viewed as dynamic and alterable, with military action amplifying them. These narratives must be credible, and all military actions should align within them (AJP-3.27 2023).

While NATO's official definitions emphasize the importance of strategic narratives, scholars like Professor Alister Miskimmon describe them as instruments for political entities to create shared understanding and influence the behavior of other actors (Miskimmon et al. 2013). Strategic narratives are also seen as captivating storylines that rally support, diminish opponents' influence, and connect strategy and narrative (Liefers 2014; Laity 2015). They serve as a useful tool to influence different audiences, building legitimacy, shaping perceptions, and provoking cognitive and psychological responses (Wellings et al., 2018; Hoyle et al., 2024; Hoyle et al., 2023).

Strategic narratives can be categorized into three types: identity, issue, and system narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017). Identity narratives aim to alter perceptions and promote a specific self-image. For example, NATO's identity narrative is rooted in the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, portraying NATO as a strong shield of democracy. Issue narratives, on the other hand, seek to influence specific policy decisions by shaping the entire discursive environment. NATO's commitment to conflict-related sexual- and gender-based violence (CRSGBV) is cited as an example of an issue narrative, promoting awareness, and presenting NATO as a champion of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda (Wright, Rosamond, 2021). System narratives focus on portraying how the international system functions, and from a NATO perspective, this could mean emphasizing the alliance's commitment to the rule-based world order.

Most sources emphasize the importance of strategic narratives, with various NATO doctrines providing guidance on how NATO should employ and modify its strategic narrative. The strategic narrative is designated as the principal context for all planning and should remain unaltered for specific audiences (AJP-10, 2023). According to the Allied Joint Doctrine, strategic narratives for certain operations should be developed by NATO Headquarters in collaboration with joint force commanders (AJP-01 2022). All NATO operations, whether military or non-military, must be compatible with the strategic narrative, while the supporting information operations are tailored for specific audiences (AJP-10, 2023).

Another level mentioned by StratCom is micro-narratives, which, unlike institutional and strategic narratives focused on supporting long-term goals, support mid- or short-term tactical objectives and activities (AJP-01 2022). Micro-narratives are considered versatile and dynamic, crafted to suit diverse audiences and various situations (AJP-10 2023). NATO StratCom emphasizes the importance of coherence between micro-narratives and broader institutional and strategic narratives. Constructing micro-narratives at the relevant level, seeking approval from Joint Force Command Commander or Joint Task Force Commander with the backing of J-10 StratCom, is recommended (AJP-10 2023). Micro-narratives can be used locally at a tactical level and to counter opposition narratives. However, NATO's concepts regarding micro-narratives are less clear compared to the emphasis on strategic narratives, possibly due to considerations of operational secrecy when crafting tactical-level narratives.

The Allied Joint Doctrine specifies that institutional narratives are political, while strategic and micro-narratives can support military operations. The institutional narrative provides guidelines for all NATO operations, ensuring that all actions and sub-narratives align with it, thereby granting NATO legitimacy and credibility, allowing it to portray itself as a beacon of stability and security (AJP-01 2022).

4.3 Narrative-led Execution

After 2022, numerous NATO doctrines underscore the pivotal role of narratives in information warfare, particularly evident in the 2022 Allied Joint Doctrine (AJP-01 2022). Serving as a capstone document providing strategic guidance for all Allied joint operations, it caters to NATO commanders and their staff. Narratives are recognized as versatile tools applicable in every facet of NATO's public diplomacy, strategic communication, and information and psychological operations. The document highlights narratives as a battleground within the information instrument, emphasizing their importance by mentioning the word 'narrative' 83 times, surpassing mentions of 'terrorism' at 53 times.

Practical insights into crafting and mobilizing narratives are evident in NATO's counter-insurgency operation doctrine, AJP-3.27 (2023). To achieve narrative supremacy, planners should construct a concise, easily comprehensible, and adaptable multilevel narrative tested on selected populations. This narrative portrays the enemy negatively, garners support for the operation, and legitimizes governments on the ground. It must remain flexible in changing strategic and operational situations and be supported on the ground with tangible actions, including addressing local grievances to dismantle insurgent narratives. For example, according to NATO's Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations (2023), even engagements at the soldier level need to adhere to the Alliance's narratives. Soldiers and NATO civilians, regardless of rank, also need to be aware of the narratives employed and how their actions impact them (AJP-10.1. 2023). Interestingly, the 2023 Allied Joint Doctrines for Strategic Communications and Information Operations provide practical tools, such as how to build effective narratives and analyse target audiences.

Narratives become intricately linked with NATO's operational objectives and planning, leading to the concept of narrative-led execution. Defined by NATO StratCom, this concept sees the narrative serving as an overarching expression of the whole-of-Alliance strategy, influencing audiences and providing context to the campaign, operation, or situation (AJP-10 2023). Narrative-led execution ensures consistent alignment of actions with words to minimize vulnerabilities adversaries could exploit (AJP-10.1. 2023). It unifies strategic intent across the Alliance on all operational levels, enabling decentralized execution to converge multiple effects on targeted audiences. The 2022 NATO Allied Joint Doctrine emphasizes a "behaviour-centric approach," acknowledging the pivotal role of people's attitudes and behaviours in achieving the end state. Narrative-led execution focuses beyond the 'enemy or adversary' to a broader audience segmented into three categories: public, stakeholder, and actor (AJP-01 2022). Commanders at every level are expected to be aware of institutional and strategic narratives, adjusting their plans accordingly to align with them.

5. Discussion

Naval British officer Steve Tatham suggested in 2008 (Tatham, 9) that “Narratives are the foundation of all strategy. They are the organizing framework for policy and the definitive reference for how events are to be argued and described.” The discussion on narratives has not emerged from a vacuum, as empirical analysis has already illustrated, showing a gradual expansion in NATO thinking related to the role of narratives. The conflicts related to the War on Terror since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States have had particular importance. Especially, the conflict in Afghanistan was a conflict about narratives and the legitimacy of particular actors taking part in the conflict.

Oleg Svet (2010, 2) argued in his campaign assessment of the US-led coalition’s psychological and information operations that the aspect of narrative was among the themes that experienced failures. Claims of strategic coherence and a lack of resonance in messaging targeted to the Afghan population highlight shortcomings in how narratives were created and reflected in the coalition's activities. Similarly, Emile Simpson (2012, 192-197) developed the idea further and emphasized the need to accept and understand the role of emotions in war, as well as the moral factors associated with emotions. At the core of such thinking was the need to have the legitimacy to wage war, to act in a potentially foreign country, and create a context-bound strategy that could win the support of the population, thus linking the aims and means of war to emotional factors.

NATO papers illustrate an organization that has tried to learn from such experiences and pay more attention not only to having a legitimate role in the conflict but also to conveying a message that reflects and supports that legitimacy. This thinking takes place while the organization acknowledges the role of the information environment, a rather abstract context in which actors, processes, and messages are dynamic.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how NATO perceives narratives. Our research question aimed to uncover the role of narratives in NATO doctrine and understand how NATO's narrative thinking has evolved over time. Based on the analysis of empirical sources, we have observed a growing significance placed on narratives by NATO. Narratives not only allow us to tell stories but also influence audiences and serve as vessels for political ideology, shaping personal and cultural identities.

NATO's narrative concept has undergone a transformation, progressing from a mere description of activities to a defining strategy where all actions must align with the Alliance's institutional and strategic narratives. In achieving cohesion across all levels, the narrative takes precedence, potentially even surpassing tactical realities. From the top-down, NATO's narrative is constructed, and adherence to this narrative is expected from the Joint Force Command down to the individuals serving in NATO's missions.

A consistent narrative strategy enables NATO to craft a robust public image and establish legitimacy. This legitimacy is considered a crucial factor in the contemporary landscape of cognitive and information warfare, where it may provide an advantage against adversaries whose primary weapon is disinformation. In this case, both legitimacy and storytelling also aim to portray NATO as stronger, more capable, and more united. This, in turn, can create deterrence in the face of a threat. The growing importance of NATO's Strategic Communications underscores the significance of narrative in this context.

In an ever more clustered and challenging information environment with hostile actors trying to sway public opinion, NATO recognizes the imperative to garner public approval. NATO relies on narrative as a valuable asset and as a shield against hostile information and cognitive warfare aimed at disrupting the Alliance's unity. Overall, NATO has adopted a history-bound and value-bound approach to create and sustain its narrative. By placing its values, rooted in the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, at the forefront of its activities, it can be anticipated that the role of narratives and values will continue to expand in future international conflicts.

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