

The Art of Narrative Warfare

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“...the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.”
Sun Tzu (544-496 BC)

While the art of non-kinetic warfare is as old as the hills, the alacrity and multi-dimensional strategy of the attacks generated by adversaries of the U.S. and her allies to create psychological susceptibility to narratives that have been weaponized is new.

Our superior conventional kinetic capacity has promoted the recourse of our adversaries to irregular, often indirect, forms of conflict. And while our superior military can, in some cases, prevent the escalation of hostilities to direct modes of confrontation, it may actually be counter-productive in the influence wars we are in now if the kinetics don't serve a narrative strategy.

Warfare is taking place in multi-level threat environments, ranging from heavily kinetic to subliminal fear-inducing strategies, in which state actors and non-state actors compete to extend their influence. Both exploit localized events to fuel civil wars, provoke desired changes in broader geo-political environments, leverage pre-existing hostilities, to manufacture conflict when they can, and foster ideological shifts in civilian populations.

State sponsorship of information operations, psychological operations, cyber attacks, and indirect sponsorship of terrorist attacks to maintain spatial displacement from lethal activity are [outpacing](#) us. A recent [Department of Defense risk assessment](#) suggests the hyperconnectivity and weaponization of information is, in part, responsible for the post-primacy status of liberal democratic systems. The commitment of liberal democratic societies to free speech and open information exchange has been turned against us by societies that don't value/practice the same ideals themselves.

Even non-state actors with economic restraints and poor conventional military capacity have enacted narratives that in some cases have rendered our own narrative a weapon in [their arsenal](#). For example, the conflation between the war on terror and a war on Islam perpetuated even further by the perception of a ban on Muslim immigrants may feed the Islamic State narrative that Islam itself is under attack. These circumstances have led to a call for [cognitive security](#). Cognitive security addresses a very different threat from physical threats, and drones and bullets cannot protect us against them.

Narrative is central to cognition. Weaponized narrative represents a deep threat to national and international security and cooperation—a threat that our advanced kinetic capacity, and those of our partner nations, cannot address alone. When

narratives are weaponized they have the capacity to undermine homeland security by shaking the faith of citizens in democratic institutions and in the rule of law causing civil unrest. Weaponized narratives on social media are the extremist recruiter's favorite tool. To stem the rise of extremism, eliminating extremists themselves is a temporary fix. The comprehensive long-term fix is to render extremist narratives obsolete.

This form of warfare is all about influence. But this is not information warfare; this is warfare over the *meaning* of the information. Information consists of facts—raw data. Narratives don't tell the facts. Narratives tell the meaning of the facts. This is narrative warfare, and our adversaries are beating our brawn with their brains. That is why the Islamic State is able to draw recruits from around the world to travel to conflict zones to fight and that is how they are able to encourage homegrown terrorists to take lethal action without physical coercion.

We don't have an influence containment strategy; we need one. However, containment of adversarial influence is not the best we can do. We can do better than that through our own improved capacities to influence the domestic populations of our adversaries and the opinions of the international community represented by organizations such as the United Nations.

Narrative is the power shifter. Those who understand narrative and how to employ it need to be invited into this fight and to lead it. The military has been receptive to anthropological studies of specific conflict zones which is, of course, crucial but now more than ever we need people who understand how brains work—not just the brains of our adversaries but also our own. This is not just a fight between truth and lies. It is a fight over *meaning* and *identity*—the meaning of the truth and the meaning of the lies. We need to focus on what kinds of identities layers (personal through national) are being constructed by both and which identities are being undermined.

Lies are intended to serve the meaning and identity goals of a hostile power, and we defeat that power not by recourse to the truth (a natural human inclination but not helpful in this fight). To the extent that truth telling is part of our strategy, it cannot be reactive; we cannot chase our adversaries around matching their lies with the truth, because, as cognitive science has demonstrated, countering lies by repeating them with the word “no” (or some other negative) actually has the [opposite effect](#). That actually strengthens the false statement in the mind of the audience. Truth and facts should be a part of our narrative but it is the [meaning](#) of the truth and lies that the narrative must tell. We need to go after adversarial attempts to project meaning and undermine it with our own narrative.

Consider the case of Russia, an adversary whose weaknesses should factor heavily into our strategic narrative:

1. Former Soviet space is a contested sphere of influence. Actions in Crimea and the instigation of a separatist rebellion in eastern Ukraine were a response to what was perceived as an attempt by the U.S. to remove Ukraine from Russia's sphere of influence. That contested influence space should be targeted by our narrative.
2. Poor performance of our adversary's military combined with physical vulnerabilities provide hints about where to aim the narrative. Long borders with limited physical barriers to foreign invasion and powerful or unstable neighbors provide a recipe for national insecurity. Physical security and narrative security work hand in hand, as do physical insecurity and narrative insecurity.
3. Both of the points above, in addition to Russia's complex involvement in Syria and the commitment of forces on the the Ukrainian border, suggest military overstretch.
4. Russia's provocations in Europe have revitalized NATO. The opportunities a revitalized NATO present to capitalize on fears should not be overlooked.
5. [Pesco](#) (the Permanent Structured Cooperation between Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands) is a defensive reaction on the part of European countries to the Trump administration's increasingly isolationist stance, and represents an agreement to cooperate to work around the United Nations if necessary. The creation of Pesco represents resilience on the part of European nations that will be viewed as a threat to Russian ambitions.
6. [Climate change](#) has affected the northern border. Attention to that change should be highlighted in parallel with Putin's reputation as a climate change skeptic. Whether or not there is real concern over climate change or not (and whether or not Russia sees warming temperatures as a benefit or not) remains a mystery but there is interest in being [perceived](#) as concerned about global warming. This contradiction should be part of our narrative material.
7. Despite talk of strategic partnership, China is an unknown variable, as they are outpacing Russia in developing cutting-edge [technologies](#). This creates a new kind of threat for Russia.

A comprehensive narrative strategy will exploit adversarial weaknesses and mitigate adversarial strengths on the level of influence. But just one narrative is not enough. Multi-level narratives, from meta to strategic to tactical will be necessary for maximum effect. Metanarrative will influence the perceptions of the international community by framing the big picture in a way that exploits the contradictions between Russia's walk and talk and detail the implications of that disjunct for the international community. Strategic-level narratives will determine our actions in a comprehensive manner. Tactical, ground-level narratives will erode confidence of the native populations of our adversary.

Psychological vulnerability, and the attendant vulnerability to influence, doesn't always rely on facts or even lived experience. It relies on [fear](#). Note, for example, the fear of terrorist attacks among the general population when the actual potential for an individual being affected by a [terrorist incident](#) is less than being affected by a car accident. Fear can be generated, and physical threats and actions are not necessary to generate fear. All one needs is a reputation for advanced military capabilities (we've got that) promoted by a robust strategic narrative that tells the meaning of the facts and re-enforces identity through a story form and structure that is familiar to the target audience. Defense systems (technological and psychological) can be overwhelmed by fear, by cognitive overload, and by the contextual distortion of a weaponized narrative.

We can erode the will of our enemies, [contain their influence](#), dominate the narrative space on all levels from micro to macro.

We begin by assessing the ways and means available to achieve the ends we seek, keeping in mind that the desired end states in the contemporary influence wars will not look like desired end states of conventional wars. One party will not be defeated completely. There will be no surrender. There will be no withdrawal. This will be an ongoing effort, and yet we have no other choice. We either fight or we lose.

We must meet the [weaponized](#) narratives of our [adversaries](#), not just with a better [weaponized narrative](#), but with a comprehensive narrative strategy. Weaponized narratives are used to attack and we need them in our arsenal. But a comprehensive narrative strategy also involves counter narratives, and most importantly [operationalized](#) (offensive) narratives that tell the story of who we are and why we are doing what we are doing. We need to tell our own story effectively so that we get out ahead of our adversaries and frame events to our advantage.

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