

**BEYOND
STORYTELLING
STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN
MILITARY STRATEGY**

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Military strategy, rooted in elite politics and in social dynamics, is difficult to separate from strategic narratives. As such, military strategy forms a meaningful discourse that unites political narration, public understanding, and the application of military force to influence an adversary. Together, strategic narratives and military strategy link intent, action, and understanding. Civilian and military practitioners must take seriously their responsibilities with respect to the development of strategic narratives.

More than just stories, strategic narratives establish and maintain convincing story lines that influence military strategies in dynamic conflicts. Today more than ever, military strategy is nested in a nation's strategic narratives. If military professionals have learned anything from recent conflicts, like that in Ukraine, it is that strategic narratives are becoming an imperative. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has clearly out-narrated Russian President Vladimir Putin throughout the Ukrainian conflict.

But the need for strategic narratives is a growing concern even at the operational level of warfare. The information domain is a wide set of largely dissimilar components, each with unique operational qualities. The underlying connection among them is a respect for the cognitive element of war, particularly the perceptions and attitudes of the players. Within this context, military strategy is situated in broader political and public spheres that are linked by storytelling. As such, strategic narratives function at a crucial confluence of perceptions of security, interests, and legitimacy.

Military strategic thought has increasingly recognized the need to acknowledge the power of strategic narratives. Late last year, the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff J-7 published Joint Publication (JP) 3-04, *Information in Joint Operations*, which fills a long-standing gap in Joint doctrine. This new doctrine is an outgrowth of the requirement to be on the leading edge of the information domain, and more specifically, to understand the role of strategic narratives within conflict ecologies.

The new doctrine explains, "A defining feature of the security environment is how competitors, adversaries, and enemies are using information as they seek to gain relative

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advantage over the US and use that advantage to affect behavior and achieve their objectives.”¹ These adversaries are seeking means to apply their strategic narratives in a way that disrupts the political and public spheres. This disruption through directed strategic narratives can become particularly salient during times of conflict. People make sense of war through stories, without which they are left wondering its meaning.² Thus, military strategy should form a meaningful discourse between political narration, public understanding, and the application of military force to influence an adversary.³ Put simply, strategic narratives within a military strategy form direct links between intent, action, and comprehension. Therefore, it is incumbent on civilian and military practitioners to realize their responsibilities with respect to crafting and sustaining strategic narratives.

Strategic Narratives

A strategic narrative is a story line used to forge consensus and influence audiences to understand complex events in a way that supports a particular stance and its associated actions. Lawrence Freedman defines a strategic narrative as being “designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events”; such narratives “are strategic because they do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current.”⁴ Nations inherently compete to be the authoritative voice in recounting a course of events by strategically employing narratives in support of their position.⁵ Strategic narratives can connect and influence audiences through three essential storytelling components: a plot that establishes the context of the event, a set of subjects that drive the story’s action, and a conclusion that argues for a clear moral path forward.

1. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), *Information in Joint Operations*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-04 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2022), I-2.

2. Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose, “Shaping Societies for War: Strategic Narratives and Public Opinion,” in *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War*, ed. Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 7; and “How to Operate Strategic Narratives: Interweaving War, Politics, and the Public,” in *Strategic Narratives*, 352.

3. David Barry and Michael Elmes, “Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of Strategic Discourse,” in *The Aesthetic Turn in Management*, ed. Stella Minihan (London: Routledge, November 2017), 432; Barry R. Posen, “Foreword: Military Doctrine and the Management of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 2 (2016): 167, <https://www.tandfonline.com/>; Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 12–13; and Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 43.

4. Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 30.

5. Jelena Subotic, “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2015): 611; Shaul R. Shenhav, “Political Narratives and Political Reality,” *International Political Science Review* 27, no. 3 (2006): 250; James Pamment, “Strategic Narratives in US Public Diplomacy: A Critical Geopolitics,” *Popular Communication* 12, no. 1 (2014): 50; and Thomas Colley, “What’s in It for Us: Responses to the UK’s Strategic Narrative on Intervention in Libya,” *RUSI Journal* 160, no. 4 (2015): 61–62.

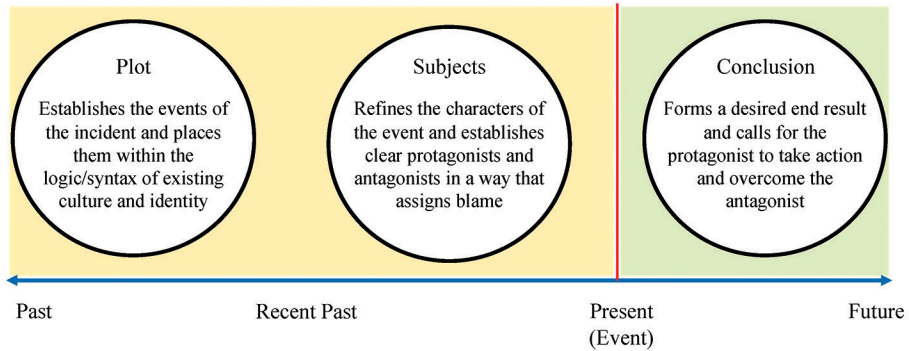


Figure 1. Narrative format

Strategic narrative plots create understanding by explaining contemporary events in a historical context that resonates with audiences (fig. 1). For example, 9/11 has often been explained through references to Pearl Harbor as a parallel instance of a deadly surprise attack on American soil that profoundly changed the social dynamics of the United States and the US military's approach to counterterrorism efforts. Narratives derive historical context from cultural memory, but the plots are constructed with significant interpretation.⁶

These narratives produce social meaning for people by making a temporal connection with their sometimes collective and traumatic history. Strong narratives draw on the existing frames of reference to establish threat and tension in the plot.⁷ Narratives evoke deep emotional identification, and broad social understanding establishes a socially constructed context to comprehend a current event.

The characterization of a narrative's subjects as protagonist and antagonist is the second component of narrative formation that embeds story lines into societal understanding. Strategic narratives accomplish this by pulling from historical stories of good and evil. The development of protagonists and antagonists within a strategic narrative resonates with audiences when a dichotomous relationship is established within easily grasped story lines (fig. 1). Societies tend to gravitate toward narratives

6. Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic, "Fictionality and Perceived Realism in Experiencing Stories: A Model of Narrative Comprehension and Engagement," *Communication Theory* 18, no. 2 (2008): 257–60; Shaul R. Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 11–12; Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000): 701–2; and Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 62–64.

7. Alexandra Homolar, "Rebels without a Conscience: The Evolution of the Rogue States Narrative in US Security Policy," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2011): 707; Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 6–7; David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 348; and Todd H. Hall, "We Will Not Swallow This Bitter Fruit: Theorizing a Diplomacy of Anger," *Security Studies* 20, no. 4 (2011): 531.

with protagonists who are familiar national heroes and antagonists who are clearly identified as villains.⁸

In a primarily American context, an excellent example of this characterization is seen in old western movies where—as clichéd as it might be—“good guys” wear white hats and “bad guys” wear black hats. This reductive characterization of good and bad can blur the lines between story and reality. As an individual becomes immersed in the narrative story line, the story’s plot and characters become more real than the factual details of the actual events and their players.⁹ This often unnoticed subtle shift of perspective can cause greater identification with protagonists and more animosity toward the antagonists.

As the third component, a conclusion takes a story line into the future and establishes a desired moral goal not entirely based on rational calculations or material interests. Strong strategic narratives project desired ends to the story that draw its audience into moral considerations rather than cost-benefit calculations (fig. 1).

As the conclusion of a strategic narrative shapes desired ends, it will inevitably ignore some elements of truth and overemphasize moral claims as it develops an emotional hold on its audience and influences how they choose to act.¹⁰ Such conclusions can emphasize social anger, call for retribution, or evoke ethical pacifism. Instead of being purely analytical, narratives thus influence rationality relative to the expected outcome promised by the story line. As E. H. Carr aptly explains, “The greater the emotional stress, the nearer and more concrete is the goal.”¹¹ The linking of anger, morality, and outcome expectancy can lead to a distinctly nonmaterial and nonrational course of action.

Much of the influence found in narratives is a function of the storytelling format that develops emotional identification with large audiences, which creates a catalyst for moral action. People tend to identify more with narratives that evoke intense feelings of fear, desire, and hope.¹² Even when an individual was not present during an

8. Séverine Autesserre, “Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and Their Unintended Consequences,” *African Affairs* 111, no. 443 (2012): 207; Busselle and Bilandzic, “Fictionality and Perceived Realism,” 258; Merlijn van Hulst and Dvora Yanow, “From Policy Fictionality and Perceived Realism in Experiencing Stories: A Model of Narrative Comprehension and Engagement ‘Frames’ to ‘Framing’: Theorizing a More Dynamic, Political Approach,” *American Review of Public Administration* 46, no. 1 (2016): 96; and Lene Hansen, “Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis,” *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 1 (2011): 58.

9. Busselle and Bilandzic, “Fictionality and Perceived Realism,” 261–62; Green and Brock, “Role of Transportation,” 701–2; and Janice Bially Mattern, “Why Soft Power Isn’t So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics,” *Millennium* 33, no. 3 (2005): 596.

10. Subotic, “Narrative,” 612.

11. Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1946), 90.

12. Campbell, *Writing Security*, 70; Hansen, “Theorizing the Image,” 53; Richard Ned Lebow, “Power, Persuasion and Justice,” *Millennium* 33, no. 3 (2005): 575; and Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 3.

event, a narrative laced with strong emotional content can make them feel as though they were.

As the need for judgment and politics pushes at the bounds of facts, strategy becomes more social than rational.¹³ The attacks on 9/11 are a prime example. For those who watched the events unfold from a distance, the horror, anger, and sorrow they felt were real. Scholars describe this connection as narrative identification, which enables individuals to engage with the story in such a way that they become immersed in the traumatic event.¹⁴ In this immersive process, broad audiences connect to a salient story line that helps define social understanding. Subsequent action can be inspired by the emotional connections people experience through narrative story lines.

But the complexity of a conflict's environment makes forming and maintaining a military strategic narrative difficult without a firm knowledge of the relevant narrative groups. One scholar described this environment as a "politically kaleidoscopic battlespace," where audiences do not intrinsically recognize what is being communicated through the application of force.¹⁵ Therefore, a military strategy that does not start with a focus on strategic narratives will rarely communicate to its audiences the desired outcomes of an action and its political intent. Instead, to overcome this obstacle, it is advisable to use an anthropological approach to developing such a narrative within a military strategy by focusing on societal groups, relationships, status dynamics, and nonstate-based frameworks.¹⁶

Operational planners can, and should, leverage a strategic narrative, but they must understand the conditional effectiveness of narratives within a contested environment. Groups, and more importantly, adversaries will develop strategic narratives that run counter to one's strategic goals. The conditional nature of strategic narratives brings up two important considerations for planners. First, there are always other and likely opposing strategic narratives at play. Second, strategic narratives are never static and will evolve as the conflict dynamics and environment change. The environment pulls and shapes strategic narratives in a way that demands planners be vigilant about monitoring adversary and internal strategic narratives at all operational planning and execution phases.

13. Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 169, 96–97; Gordon A. Creig and Felix Gilbert, "Reflections on Strategy in the Present and Future," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Gordon Craig and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 863–64; Liddell B. H. Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Meridian, 1991), 323; and Lawrence Freedman, "The Possibilities and Limits of Strategic Narratives," in *Strategic Narratives*, 23–24.

14. Jonathan Cohen, "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters," *Mass Communication and Society* 4, no. 3 (2001): 245; Barry and Elmes, "Strategy Retold," 433–34; Melanie C. Green et al., "Narrative Effects," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 3rd ed., ed. Jennings Bryant, Mary Beth Oliver, and Arthur A. Raney (New York: Routledge, 2009), 130–33; and Robin L. Nabi, "Media and Emotion," in *Media Effects*, 163–70.

15. Simpson, *Ground Up*, 23.

16. David Kilcullen, "New Paradigms for 21st Century Conflict," *Foreign Policy Agenda* 12, no. 5 (2007): 42.

Integrating Strategic Narratives with Military Strategy

Military strategy outlines the causal linkages that compose an underlying problem to be addressed and determines the means that best empower inherent capabilities to solve the challenge or defeat the adversary. The application of military force in politically complex situations warrants a common understanding of the negotiating objectives, because without firmly agreed-upon ends, new rationales can cause unexpected complications.¹⁷ Thus, strategy is the schematic that connects means to ends in a logical and achievable fashion. Specifically, operational design within military strategy is the process of framing and managing the underlying political problems that necessitate the application of military means.¹⁸ The intent of operational design within military strategy is to enable an orderly and analytical process that can be applied to complex situations.

Modern warfare necessitates military strategy be nested in a nation's strategic narratives to effectively translate the application of force into national objectives. Placing military strategy into a broader context of strategic narratives enables a greater understanding of a strategy's connection with the political and public spheres. Military planners inherently reach for strategic narratives as they operationally design military actions to affect the battlespace in a way that achieves a transition from the observed environment to the desired environment. This transition requires a degree of common understanding among multiple groups within the environment and an interpretive framework for the application of force.¹⁹ Strategic narratives form the bridge that increases connections among the groups within an environment and which thus helps translate military force into strategic objectives.

Joint doctrine has begun to provide specific guidance on the application of strategic narratives within military strategy, but the connection between theory and practice needs further elucidation. Such narratives would ideally provide a straight vector from

17. Herbert R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (Boston: HarperCollins, 1998), 29; Emily Goldman, *Power in Uncertain Times: Strategy in the Fog of Peace* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 8; Emanuel Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, ed. Thazha V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 86–87; and Peter V. Jakobsen and Jens Ringsmose, "How the Danish Public Was Persuaded to Support an Unprecedented Costly Military Endeavor in Afghanistan," in *Strategic Narratives*, 144.

18. Robert Erdeniz, "Operations Planning Revisited: Theoretical and Practical Implications of Methodology," *Defence Studies* 16, no. 3 (2016): 248–49; and Jeffrey M. Reilly, *Operational Design: Distilling Clarity from Complexity for Decisive Action* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2012), 1.

19. Cori E. Dauber, "The TRUTH Is out There: Responding to Insurgent Disinformation and Deception Operations," *Military Review* 89, no. 1 (2009): 14–15; David T. Culklin, "Discerning the Role of the Narrative in Strategy Development," *Military Review* 93, no. 1 (January–February 2013): 63, <https://www.armypress.army.mil/>; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 23; and Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006), 6.

the highest levels of strategy down to the tactics used on the battlefield.²⁰ Establishing this connection is difficult at best, but operational planners can begin by applying strategic narratives in three aspects.

The first use of a strategic narrative within military strategy is to understand the context of a conflict's environment. Studying the narratives operating within a conflict environment can help the planner discern the observed/current situation and the desired future outcome. This is an important element to strategic design within the planning process. Studying the presence of strategic narratives helps planners understand the conflict environment, and thus, planners can better leverage the influence of strategic narratives.

The second phase of strategic narrative employment is intended to maintain legitimacy for sustained domestic support and to link actions with national security objectives. American Joint military doctrine recognizes the importance of strategic narratives to synchronize the actions and messaging of efforts to achieve mission accomplishment.²¹ Without a level of domestic support, it is extremely difficult to conduct extended military operations.²²

Third, strategic narratives are a significant consideration when ensuring military force is applied with a purposeful design to elicit a desired response from an adversary and achieve national security ends. Momentary battlefield victories should be considered secondary to the effective application of military force to achieve deliberately chosen strategic objectives through messaging.²³ These three phases set a functional schematic for the use of strategic narratives within formulations of strategy.

The Operational Environment

Strategic narratives play an essential role in the initial stages of operational design as the planner makes sense of the current environment and defines the desired environment. Narratives are a human's primary means of forming explanations and predicting future outcomes.²⁴ Though they often go unnoticed, these threads shape human understanding of events and establish patterns of thought that develop into mechanisms to achieve strategic ends. Within the operational design process, nar-

20. David Betz, "Communication Breakdown: Strategic Communications and Defeat in Afghanistan," *Orbis* 55, no. 4 (2011): 615; Erik Noreen and Jan Angstruom, "A Catch-All Strategic Narrative: Target Audiences and Swedish Troop Contribution to ISAF in Afghanistan," in *Strategic Narratives*, 282–83; and Simpson, *Ground Up*, 46.

21. CJCS, *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2020), I-3, III-61.

22. CJCS, *Joint Operations*, JP 3-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2022), III-14.

23. Antulio J. Echevarria, *Toward an American Way of War* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2004), 10; Smith, *Utility of Force*, 5; Robert J. Art and Kelly M. Greenhill, eds., *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Relations*, 8th ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 11; and Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 177, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

24. Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 28–29.

natives are a crucial sense-making tool that enables a better understanding of the operational environment and focuses strategies on effectively bringing conflicts to their desired conclusion.²⁵

A strategic narrative provides the purpose of military action, connects strategies with society, and articulates the desired political end states.²⁶ By comprehending the nature of strategic narratives, planners can form a more coherent picture of the operational environment. Without a sound grasp of the current and desired environments, however, operational plans run a greater risk of being conceived on ill-defined goals or faulty rationale, leading to the misapplication of military force.

Going beyond sense-making, a strategic narrative's use of plots, characters, and conclusions allows for a logical progression from the observed to the desired environment within an operational design: "A strategic narrative is, in fact, strategy in narrative form."²⁷ Furthermore, Joint military doctrine requires planners draft a narrative that describes the two environments and outlines relationships and tensions, thus enabling a sound understanding for the command and all involved.²⁸

The very act of operational design calls for a coherent strategic narrative. As planners consider the conflict's plot and characters, they can form contextual threads that link actions with the intended results. Concurrently, the strategic narrative's conclusion establishes the operational priorities and plays an outsized role in determining the criteria for conflict resolution. From an operational planning perspective, a strategic narrative's plot, character, and conclusion enable military action to shape an adversary's behavior toward achieving the desired environment.

Demarcating Legitimacy and Operational Action

Undeniably, few other events grab more attention than the commitment of military forces in a conflict.²⁹ Military conflict touches on public concerns in an extremely human way. Today, employing the military comes with an inescapable requirement to explain the necessity of force to domestic audiences through strategic narratives that maintain the legitimacy of action. Beyond just the physical, stories are how the public fundamen-

25. Culkin, "Role," 62–63; David Betz, *Carnage and Connectivity: Landmarks in the Decline of Conventional Military Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 43; and Simpson, *Ground Up*, 32.

26. George Dimitriu and Beatrice De Graaf, "Fighting the War at Home: Strategic Narratives, Elite Responsiveness, and the Dutch Mission in Afghanistan, 2006–2010," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 1 (2016): 6; Barry and Elmes, "Strategy Retold," 433; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, "Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives of War," in *Strategic Narratives*, 59–60; and Jeremy Black, *War and the New Disorder in the 21st Century* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 3, 163–64.

27. De Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose, "How to Operate," 353.

28. CJCS, JP 5-0, IV-17; CJCS, JP 3-0, III-18; Erdeniz, "Operations Planning Revisited," 251, 253–54; and Reilly, *Operational Design*, 5.

29. Louis Klarevas, "The 'Essential Domino' of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (2002): 418; and Thomas W. Smith, "The New Law of War: Legitimizing Hi-Tech and Infrastructural Violence," *International Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2002): 370.

tally understands its sense of safety and related security issues.³⁰ Strategic narrative plots that engage the emotions of fear and self-preservation can strongly impact security perceptions.

Alternatively, when domestic audiences fail to see the security necessity of a conflict, a nation can lose the strategic initiative. Since Vietnam, it has been generally recognized that domestic public opinion and media coverage have a constraining influence on military action.³¹ The absence of domestic support for the Vietnam War effort was crippling, and since then, there has been a tacit understanding that American wars can be won or lost at home. Losing legitimacy over casualties caused or suffered during military efforts can effectively determine the negative outcome of a conflict without any decisive result on the battlefield.

The strategic requirement for continued support from domestic audiences demands strategies ensure military action and maintain legitimacy within the strategic narratives. Operational planners must consider the potential domestic, political, and resource hurdles for any military action.³² In this sense, strategic narratives represent a source of power, because defining the meaning of events is a fundamental exercise in power.³³ Military action is difficult to justify outside of the strategic narrative framework, and mobilization of resources is almost impossible without a supportive story line. The strategic narrative should thus seek to frame the adversary in a way that logically connects the public understanding of the situation with military and political strategy.³⁴

30. Fabrizio Cotichia and Andrea Catanzaro, "The Fog of Words: Assessing the Problematic Relationship between Strategic Narratives, (Master) Frames and Ideology," *Media, War & Conflict* 15, no.4 (2022): 3; and Fabrizio Cotichia and Carolina De Simone, "The Winter of Our Consent? Framing Italy's 'Peace Mission' in Afghanistan," in *Strategic Narratives*, 222–23.

31. Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley, "How Are Foreign Policy Attitudes Structured? A Hierarchical Model," *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 4 (1987): 1113; Walter Lippmann, *US Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), 51; Smith, "New Law of War," 358–59; and Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6–7.

32. Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 168–69; Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, 12–13; Betz, *Carnage and Connectivity*, 125; and Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 167–68.

33. Jutta Weldes, "High Politics and Low Data," in *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, ed. Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 230; Colin Hay, "Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the 'Winter of Discontent,'" *Sociology* 30, no. 2 (1996): 255; and Henrik Larsen, *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis: France, Britain and Europe* (London, UK: Routledge, 1997), 14.

34. Dimitriu and De Graaf, "Fighting the War," 6; Culkin, "Discerning the Role," 61; Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 13; Janice Gross Stein, "Rational Deterrence against 'Irrational' Adversaries? No Common Knowledge," in *Complex Deterrence*, 59–60; and Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 162–64.

In a more modern example, the US military recognized the need to maintain legitimacy in the Kosovo campaign. It was generally accepted that no single bomb could win the war, but a single bomb in the wrong place could lose the war. The strategy logically focused on keeping the spotlight on then-President of Serbia Slobodan Milosevic and his crimes against civilians. The necessity to maintain this narrative significantly limited the number of approved targets available for the military's coercive bombing campaign. As the Kosovo campaign demonstrated, society's willingness to support militarized actions constantly relies on its perception of the virtue of the outcome.³⁵ Strategic narratives have a meaningful role in operational design as planners consider the limits of their operational leeway in developing courses of action within the context of maintaining continued legitimacy.

Military Force

Strategic narratives can bridge the gap between the intentions of military force, the threat of more force, and an opponent's perception of future outcomes to bring about a shift to the desired environment. There is a growing recognition of the need to connect strategic narratives with the nonkinetic side of military force to effect change in an adversary.³⁶ Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom provide salient examples that force alone does not bring about successful military operations. Now, when evaluating a conflict's outcome, physical destruction of a specific target has less impact than the perceived message derived from the use of force and the conceptual space it provides to political outcomes.

Within this context, force is intended to persuade adversaries to come to a negotiated settlement. The use of force sets the conditions to play on or change an opponent's perceptions to achieve negotiated ends.³⁷ As such, the strategic narrative becomes a primary objective; success or failure is derived from projecting one's narrative on the

35. Arnold Wolfers, "National Security' as an Ambiguous Symbol," *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1952): 488–89; Hurwitz and Peffley, "Foreign Policy Attitudes," 1109; Rocio Garcia-Retamero, Stephanie M. Müller, and David L. Rousseau, "The Impact of Value Similarity and Power on the Perception of Threat," *Political Psychology* 33, no. 2 (2012): 182–83; and Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, 4–5.

36. Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power," *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 73, <https://journals.sagepub.com/>; *Cyber-Enabled Information Operations, Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Cybersecurity*, 115th Cong. (2017) (testimony of Rand Waltzman, senior information scientist at RAND Corporation), 2, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>; Betz, *Carnage and Connectivity*, 92; and Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 99–102.

37. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 494; Robert J. Art, "American Foreign Policy and the Fungibility of Force," *Security Studies* 5, no. 4 (1996): 10–11; Paul Huth, Christopher Gelpi, and D. Scott Bennett, "The Escalation of Great Power Militarized Disputes: Testing Rational Deterrence Theory and Structural Realism," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 610; and Liddell B. H. Hart, *Paris: Or, the Future of War* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1925), 31.

enemy to overcome their desire to fight.³⁸ The aim of military force in any conflict should be socially and politically oriented toward enticing an opponent to change their behavior.

Strategic narratives can be further employed to influence an opponent's perception of threat and their ability to maintain legitimacy in a conflict. In many of the recent historic victories of smaller forces over superior military powers, a common denominator was the ability of the smaller oppositional element to influence the opponent's internal political and social discourse.³⁹ A strategic narrative can be potentially employed in a way that generates internal division over the interests and legitimacy of a conflict to the point that it disrupts an opponent's ability to continue fighting. The objective then is to cultivate strategic narratives that have a high chance of disrupting an enemy's narrative in such a way that the narrative itself experiences internal dissonance.⁴⁰

One benefit of a strategic-narrative-focused strategy is thus avoiding the circular argument that extra force means more persuasion. Strategic narratives should not necessarily be seen as a replacement for the use of force, but rather as being pervasively connected to all aspects of a military campaign.⁴¹ Strategic narratives continue a dialogue with an opponent and ultimately reach a compromise that ends hostilities.

Conclusion

Strategic narratives produce conscious discernment of the world and events outside the logic of pure rational calculations. The pace of information dissemination creates a more interconnected society, which increases the importance of strategic narratives' influence on understanding. Everyone tells stories to make sense of the world; this storytelling is innate to everyday lives. But the concept can also be aggregated in such a way to help explain the actions of nations. Within today's dynamic informatized world, it is becoming more difficult to separate the narratives from rational-based interests and threats.

The US military can learn three significant lessons from recognizing strategic narrative's role in operational planning. The first is that strategic narratives form a source of power through their ability to define the meaning of events. Strategic narratives will likely be a particularly important component of competition and conflict between the United States and peer adversaries. Second, understanding that adversaries have their

38. Simpson, *Ground Up*, 61; Smith, *Utility of Force*, 276–77; Joseph S. Nye, "The Information Revolution and Soft Power," *Current History* 113, no. 759 (2014): 19–20; and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 370.

39. Mack, "Nations," 177–78.

40. De Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose, "Shaping Societies," 4–5; Betz, "Communication Breakdown," 623; Waltzman, Testimony, 6; and Neils Röling and Marlene Maarleveld, "Facing Strategic Narratives: In Which We Argue Interactive Effectiveness," *Agriculture and Human Values* 16 (September 1999): 302, <https://www.springer.com/>.

41. Betz, "Communication Breakdown," 624; Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, 313; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, "Great Power Politics," 57–58; and William Maley, "The War in Afghanistan: Australia's Strategic Narratives," in *Strategic Narratives*, 82.

own strategic narratives is essential. Within any war, a military strategy should attempt to account for the dynamic strategic narratives that are involved in the conflict, and the adversary's strategic narratives need to be understood and overcome. Third, military force is difficult to justify without the strong reinforcement of a strategic narrative.

A few recommendations emerge from these implications. Further attention should be given to the need for greater civil-military integration when considering how strategic narratives are operationalized both in conflict and in confrontations that are below the level of war. Additionally, more research is required to understand how strategic narratives could affect democracies versus authoritarian regimes. A democracy might seem more susceptible to adversary narratives, but it also has a level of resiliency gained through deliberative processes. Conversely, authoritarian regimes seem more capable of controlling information, but this need to control the narrative can also become a weakness.

Finally, as full-scale conflicts between peer states become more devastating, focusing on strategic narratives could provide avenues to ameliorate tensions or resolve conflict faster. Military strategists and planners have made great strides in better understanding how to operationalize strategic narratives. Significant room remains, however, for further research and growth in perceiving the role of these narratives in military strategy. **Æ**

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