

NATO: AN ALLIANCE IN THE MIDST OF INFORMATION WARS

As famously stated by 18th century Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz, each era has its own kind of war, its own peculiar preconceptions, and its own limiting conditions. This is particularly true in the current environment in which the word “hybrid” has taken on new and increasingly complex meanings, whether it is the new communications environment in which we live today or a new type of warfare on and outside of the traditional battlefields. These new hybrid environments create a unique set of challenges for governments and international organizations in how to respond effectively. This article will reflect on the current situation NATO is facing in terms of meeting challenges posed by the hybrid environments on its eastern and southern borders, in particular information warfare and propaganda, and how it responds to them.

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Hybrid warfare was widely accepted as a concept in 2005 with the publication of Frank Hoffman's paper "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars." Hoffman defines hybrid threats as: "Any adversary that simultaneously employs a tailored mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the same time and battle space to obtain their political objectives."¹

There is a universal agreement amongst experts that the first modern type of hybrid warfare as defined by Hoffman was effectively used by Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon War. In his seminal book on *Future Warfare*, military strategist Colin Gray argues that this modern warfare is not new and that mankind has always used asymmetric approaches to exploit the enemy's weakness. New technologies, such as cyber-attacks, are in fact not changing the nature of asymmetry and warfare, they just add a new dimension.²

In the history of mankind, we can find lots of examples of deliberate twisting of information to mislead the enemy: one of the oldest examples is the Trojan horse offered to the city of Troy by the Greeks. The point of the gift was pure deception to gain a strategic advantage. In their encyclopedia of the history of propaganda and persuasion, leading authors in public diplomacy provide dozens of case studies, from the 1500s up until today, with illustrative examples of the use of propaganda, disinformation, and deception during the reformation period in Europe, the French Revolution, the First and Second World Wars, and the infamous Nazi and Soviet propaganda tactics.³

The current debate on hybrid warfare is a result of Russian actions in Ukraine (2014), including most tools of national power such as diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement elements.

The Russian Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasymov, has, as early as in February 2013, commented on Russia's new approach in warfare:

The very "rules of war" have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, such new-type conflicts are comparable with the consequences of any real war. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic,

¹ Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *JFQ*, Issue 52, first quarter, 2009.

² Damien Van Puyvelde, "Hybrid war – does it even exist?," *NATO Review*, www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/Al-so-in-2015/hybrid-modern-future-warfare-russia-ukraine/EN/

³ Nicholas J. Cull, David Culbert and David Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia: 1500 to the Present* (ABC-CLIO, 2003).

informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.⁴

In its Wales Summit declaration dated 5 September 2015, NATO describes hybrid warfare as a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures employed in a highly integrated design.⁵

The combination of military and non-military factors (such as energy and economic tools) is not new. Neither is the usage of information as a weapon in a conflict, states the head of NATO’s Strategic Communications in Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) Mark Laity.⁶

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According to the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, based in Latvia, in hybrid war, information attacks are delivered through propaganda methods. Lies mixed with facts, simple historical misinterpretations, and the continuous exercise of conspiracy theories create an environment of confusion.⁷

Propaganda and Disinformation Today as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare

Russia is one of the key players in modern disinformation campaigns. During the Georgian-Russian War in August 2008, the Western public and media agreed that Georgia had deployed a much sleeker public relations (PR) campaign, headed by its then-President Mikheil Saakashvili, and that despite having lost the war, Georgia won the PR effort.⁸

Five years later, during the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, Russia leads a visibly improved PR campaign. It deploys what TV

⁴ General Valery Gerasymov, *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 27 February 2013.

⁵ “NATO Wales Summit Declaration, paragraph 13,” *NATO*, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm?selectedLocale=en

⁶ Mark Laity, “NATO’s Strategic Communications: Staying Relevant in the new information wars,” *Euro-Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 3 (March 2015).

⁷ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, “How can NATO mitigate the effect of Russian Propaganda,” *Euro-Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 3 (March 2015).

⁸ Ian Traynor, “Plucky little Georgia: Saakashvili’s PR agency wins on second front,” *The Guardian*, 16 August 2008, www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/16/georgia.russia

producer Peter Pomerantsev and Editor in Chief of *The Interpreter* Michael Weiss call the “weaponization of information.” It uses a network of officials, journalists, commentators, and internet trolls to create an alternative reality in which nothing is true and everything is possible.⁹

In his testimony to the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs on 15 April 2014, Pomerantsev further commented on the evolution and increasing sophistication of the Russian information campaign, with Crimea being a culmination of a long process, not the beginning. An early example of information-psychological warfare was seen in Estonia in 2007 in directing massive cyber-attacks following a decision of the Estonian authorities to move a Soviet war memorial from the city center. Today, Russia wages a war on information with an aim to disorganize and demoralize the West rather than persuade the public of the truth.¹⁰

“During the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, Russia leads a visibly improved PR campaign [compared to the Georgian-Russian War in August 2008].”

In his article in *Time*, reporter Simon Shuster names *RT* (formerly known as *Russia Today*) as the major weapon of the Russian government towards the West. *RT* operates in over 100 countries. Its latest outlet opened in the UK, and it has plans to expand in Germany, France, and Serbia. *RT* generates more YouTube views than any other news channel in the world. President Vladimir Putin founded *RT* in 2005 with a budget of around 30 million dollars and gradually increased it up to more than 300 million dollars per year

by 2010. By comparison, the *BBC World Service Group*, which includes TV, radio, and online news distribution, has a budget of 376 million dollars for 2014-15. The *BBC*’s International Service is the biggest broadcast newsgathering operation in the world.¹¹

Whilst Russia has a very sophisticated PR machinery, so does the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), which uses social media and professional videos to attract thousands of young people from NATO-allied and partner nations to join the

⁹ Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money* (New York: Institute of Modern Russia, 2014).

¹⁰ Peter Pomerantsev, “Confronting Russia’s weaponization of information,” speech given on 15 April 2014, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, London.

¹¹ Simon Schuster, “Inside Putin’s On Air Machine,” *Time*, 5 March 2015, <http://time.com/rt-putin/>

fighting in Iraq and Syria. NATO's eastern and southern borders are, indeed, threatened by hybrid warfare, and disinformation is used as a weapon.

NATO's Response to Disinformation Campaigns

During its last summit in Wales on 5 September 2015, NATO's Heads of States and Governments clearly identified the organization's response to hybrid warfare. The Summit Declaration urges the Alliance to develop:

The necessary tools and procedures required to deter and respond effectively to hybrid warfare threats, and the capabilities to reinforce national forces. This will also include enhancing strategic communications, developing exercise scenarios in light of hybrid threats, and strengthening coordination between NATO and other organizations, in line with relevant decisions taken, with a view to improving information sharing, political consultations, and staff-to-staff coordination.¹²

Ultimately, NATO's response to Russia's propaganda is based on its strength and its credibility as a defensive organization. This means taking measures to keep allies safe. The Alliance is currently implementing the biggest reinforcement of the Euro-Atlantic collective defense since the Cold War, with more troops and more exercises to enhance security and stability in Europe. NATO has also more than doubled the size of its Response Force, from 13,000 to 30,000. NATO exercises are announced months in advance; they are visible on the NATO website, and are open to observers, including from Russia.

“RT (formerly known as Russia Today) is Russia's major propaganda weapon against the West.”

A year after the Wales Summit declaration, NATO has already progressed extensively in its efforts to counter Russian propaganda. The Alliance is doing this not with more propaganda, but rather by countering fiction with facts and providing continued transparency. For example, NATO clearly communicates its actions in support of its collective defense core tasks at key international fora and events, and ensures extensive daily engagement among international media outlets and its high level officials. In 2014, NATO's Press and Media Section handled more than 3,000 media queries (400 percent more than in 2013). In addition to organizing around 50 press tours for journalists, it organized collective defensive exercises, NATO Ministers

¹² “NATO Wales Summit Declaration, paragraph 13,” NATO, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm?selectedLocale=en

of Foreign Affairs and Defence meetings, and the NATO Summit of Heads of State and Government in Wales. A webpage entitled “NATO-Russia: Setting the Record Straight” was also set up on the NATO website to provide fact sheets that debunked Russia’s myths and illustrated NATO’s actions with regards to the crisis in Ukraine.

NATO reinforced its own strategic communications capabilities and capacities and supported the Ukrainian government in setting up a Crisis Communications Centre in Kyiv, concluded a partnership on Strategic Communications with the Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, and joined an informal setting of the Friends of Ukraine group.

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NATO is providing financial support to a number of NGOs in Ukraine and independent media and grass-roots organizations such as the *Kiev Post* or the *Stopfake.org*. Similar programs are also supported in a number of partner and NATO member states to counter disinformation and to dispel myths. With a specific response to the tasking from the Wales Summit to reinforce cooperation with other international organizations,

NATO has reached out to the EU’s External Actions Service (EEAS) to foster closer consultations and cooperation.

In February 2015, NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division organized a Public Diplomacy Forum dedicated to the topic of effective communications in face of disinformation campaigns by state and non-state actors. In his keynote speech, NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow noted:

NATO’s role here is to rebut Russian propagan-
da by deconstructing it, debunk-
ing Moscow’s false historical narratives and distorted facts, by explaining the
reality of Russia’s actions and the international rules by breaking it. We must
continue to tell a compelling story of who we are and what we stand for.¹³

Jason Stanley argues that liberal democracies should not employ counter-propagan-
da but rather continue to stress liberal values.¹⁴ Equally, Pomerantzev concluded
his testimony in the House Committee on Foreign Affairs by agreeing that liberal

¹³ Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, “Meeting the strategic communications challenges,” speech given on 11 February 2015, Brussels, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_117556.htm

¹⁴ “Interview with Jason Stanley,” *Euro-Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 3 (March 2015).

democracies are ill-equipped to fight propaganda and that the openness of democracies, the very quality that is meant to make them more competitive than authoritarian models, becomes their biggest vulnerability. This vulnerability makes the task of NATO, as a forum of 28 democracies, even more difficult.

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In order to overcome the challenges hybrid warfare creates in the information domain, NATO’s Centre of Excellence on Strategic Communications recommends the following five key steps to NATO and its allies:

- Raise awareness and critical thinking
- Learn from history
- Care about truth – reveal the lies
- Care about media quality – support professionalism of media
- Tell your own story¹⁵

The conclusion is that NATO and its allies have to continue developing critical capacities and effective communications to overcome disinformation campaigns and attacks on the Alliance’s founding principles of liberal democracy and free societies.

¹⁵ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, “How can NATO mitigate the effect of Russian Propaganda?,” *Euro-Atlantic quarterly*, Vol. 3 (March 2015).