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DISINFORMATION

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NATO RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION

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Because of the changes in the security landscape, proactive communication with members is more critical than ever before for organisations like NATO. Russia's systematic use of deception, propaganda and false news is a significant component of the hybrid warfare it has waged against its neighbours, including Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the three NATO allies in the Baltics. Following the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in the winter of 2014, and the illegal and unlawful annexation of Crimea, NATO and its allies became targets of Russian propaganda. Numerous studies have been conducted documenting Russia's propagandistic efforts in most of the NATO countries and their allies by lone specialists, civic networks, and non-governmental organisations even beforehand, and since 2014. This article focuses on the attacks and counterattacks directed squarely against NATO and the alliance's response to them.

Background

Several military historians contend that the employment of deception and hybrid threats is nothing new in the annals of war. In the past, the disadvantaged side would utilise deceit to gain strategic and tactical advantages in warfare. Terrorist attacks in the twenty-first century by non-state entities like Hezbollah, the Taliban, and the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria have contributed to the rise of asymmetric, or hybrid, threats.¹ It must be emphasised that the means of conflict have fundamentally

changed. Von Clausewitz's paraphrased statement that war is a chameleon, which will change its aspect at each occurrence, is more relevant today than it has ever been before.²

In 1995, the United States introduced the concept of asymmetry in their Joint Doctrine.³ This idea was initially applied in a narrow and simplistic manner.⁴ Following the realisation and materialisation of "asymmetric" conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan,⁵ the United States Department of Defence finally defined asymmetric warfare

1 Frank Hoffman, 'Hybrid Warfare and Challenges', *Joint Force Quarterly* 52, 2009.

2 Antulio J Echevarria II, 'War Is More than a Chameleon', *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

3 Robert Johnson, 'Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, 2017.

4 Gergely Tóth, 'Legal Challenges in Hybrid Warfare Theory and Practice: Is There a Place for Legal Norms at All?' in Sergey Sayapin and Evhen Tsybulenko (eds), *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law*, Springer, 2018.

5 Josef Schroeff and Stuart J Kaufman, 'Hybrid Actors, Tactical Variety: Rethinking Asymmetric and Hybrid War', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, 2014.

as attempts to circumvent or undermine an opponent's strengths while exploiting his weaknesses, using methods that differ significantly from those of the opponents.⁶ The concept of hybrid warfare first emerged back in 2002: William J. Nemeth used his thesis, *Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare*, to popularise the concept of hybrid warfare.⁷ The author described a society where ancient and contemporary elements merged, and this society fought using a combination of both new and old strategies. Hybrid warfare, sometimes synonymous with asymmetric warfare and sometimes denoting a subcategory within it, has recently entered NATO's lexicon. NATO officials are more comfortable with the phrase.⁸

As Russia launched a coordinated sequence of operations in the winter and spring of 2014, and again in 2022 against its neighbour Ukraine, it ushered in a new era of hybrid warfare.⁹ This included the "little green men" (i.e., Russian troops without insignia) illegally annexing Crimea, a phoney referendum on the annexation, and widespread propaganda and disinformation about attacks by Ukrainian nationalists on Russian-speaking citizens in Crimea

and the Donbas, as well as a phoney distortion of modern history and cyber-attacks combined with energy blackmail, because of Ukraine's reliance on Russian gas supplies.¹⁰ Technological progress in society, globalisation, and the interconnectedness of critical supply chains across nations are new features of the current form of hybrid warfare. All these factors have contributed to an overall increase in threat intensity, necessitating a nuanced suite of responses for effective defence and deterrence.

Immediately after the events in Ukraine in early 2014, NATO recognised this need. Allies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization met in Wales on September 5, 2014, and outlined areas in which NATO should adopt an appropriate policy in response to hybrid threats.¹¹ Hybrid warfare is defined by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a "wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures employed in a highly integrated design."¹²

In March 2022, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that the alliance must be prepared to deal with all aspects of this new reality from wherever it originates. Further he stated, "[and] that means we must look

6 Gergely Tóth, 'Legal Challenges in Hybrid Warfare Theory and Practice: Is There a Place for Legal Norms at All?' in Sergey Sayapin and Evhen Tsybulenko (eds), *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law*, Springer, 2018.

7 William J Nemeth, 'Future War and Chechnya : A Case for Hybrid Warfare', Thesis, 2002, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36699567.pdf>; Bastian Giegerich, 'Hybrid Warfare and the Changing Character of Conflict', *Connections* 15, 2016; Bettina Renz, 'Russia and "Hybrid Warfare"', *Contemporary Politics* 22, 2016.

8 Murat Caliskan and Michel Liégeois, 'The Concept of "Hybrid Warfare" Undermines NATO's Strategic Thinking: Insights from Interviews with NATO Officials', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* #1, 2020.


9 Ahan Gadkari and Tushar Rajput, 'A Leopard Never Changes Its Spots – Legal Validity of Russia's Use of Force against Ukraine', *Berkeley Journal of International Law*, 2022, <https://www.berkeleyjournalofinternationalallaw.com/post/a-leopard-never-changes-its-spots-legal-validity-of-russia-s-use-of-force-against-ukraine>; Taras Kuzio, 'Russia-Ukraine Crisis: The Blame Game, Geopolitics and National Identity', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2018.

10 Barbora Maronkova, 'NATO in the New Hybrid Warfare Environment', *Ukraine Analytica*, #11, 2018,

11 North Atlantic Council, 'Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales', March 2003, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/sede/dv/sede240914walesummit_/sede240914walesummit_en.pdf.

12 *Ibid.*

*closely at how we prepare for; deter; and if necessary defend against hybrid warfare.*¹³ NATO must be able to keep a close eye on the situation, analyse the data, and identify persons responsible for the seemingly random acts of violence. In the same way that hybrid warfare techniques are a complex network of interconnected acts, so must the counterstrategy of defence and deterrence be. Cybersecurity, situational awareness, and the fight against misinformation are just a few of the many pressing issues that need fixing.



NATO made progress in its hybrid warfare policy during its Brussels Summit on July 11, 2018, by establishing counter-hybrid support teams, which will give specialised targeted assistance to partners

At its summit in Warsaw, Poland, in July 2016, NATO formally established a policy and defined specific measures for implementing that strategy, as it relates to fighting hybrid warfare.¹⁴ The country under assault has the main duty to defend itself against hybrid threats and attacks. At any point in a hybrid campaign, NATO is ready to aid a member nation. To defend themselves, members of the North Atlantic Alliance and its partners are ready to counteract hybrid warfare. North Atlantic Council members may choose to use Washington Treaty Article 5 in a crisis (The Warsaw Summit Declaration).¹⁵

NATO made progress in its hybrid warfare policy during its Brussels Summit on July 11, 2018, by establishing counter-hybrid support teams, which will give specialised targeted assistance to partners upon request, following a prior decision to establish such cyber response teams. The specifics of these groups' procedures are currently being discussed and planned. Hybrid warfare is intricate and transnational. That is why NATO takes a big picture approach, teaming up with the EU and partners like Finland, Sweden, Ukraine, and others. The following are the four pillars around which NATO's response to hybrid warfare is built:

1. Defence and Deterrence in order to have high readiness forces in place and credible deterrence on land, air and sea.
2. Cyber defence to protect NATO and individual allies from cyber-attacks.
3. Resilience to enhance national civil preparedness and ensure protection of critical infrastructure.
4. Strategic communications to fight disinformation and propaganda.

Regular exercises and heightened awareness of one's surroundings are the glue that holds these pillars together.¹⁶

Depending on the circumstances, the energy sector, together with the economy and commerce, may be crucial components of a country's overall strategy. Being a political and military alliance, NATO does not have jurisdiction over these issues.¹⁷

13 Jim Garamone, 'Stoltenberg Expects NATO Leaders to Strengthen Alliance Posture', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2975977/stoltenberg-expects-nato-leaders-to-strengthen-alliance-posture/>.

14 'Warsaw Summit Communiqué – Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw, 8-9 July 2016', *NATO*, 9.07.2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Maria Mälksoo, 'Countering Hybrid Warfare as Ontological Security Management: The Emerging Practices of the EU and NATO', *European Security* #27, 2018.

17 Alexandra-Maria Bocse, 'NATO, Energy Security and Institutional Change', *European Security* #1, 2020.

A country's willingness to fight back and protect itself is put to the test in hybrid warfare, as reiterated by the NATO secretary general.¹⁸ Hybrid strategies may also be a precursor to a full-scale assault, with conventional troops raising the pressure and waiting to pounce on any weakness. NATO and its allies must show that they can and will respond quickly to crises throughout the globe.¹⁹


How NATO Fights Russian Propaganda and Disinformation

For an organisation like NATO, which values preventative dialogue with its members, the current security situation necessitates new means of communication. Russia's systematic use of deception, propaganda, and false news is a key component of the hybrid warfare it has waged against its neighbours, including Ukraine, Georgia, and the three NATO allies in the Baltics, and Poland. From 2004 until 2014, Russia targeted its neighbours with propaganda assaults. But, with the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in the winter of 2014, and the unlawful annexation of Crimea, NATO and its allies also became targets for Russia.

Most NATO members have been investigating Russia's propagandistic activities with the participation of independent specialists, civic networks, and non-governmental organisations. This article's focus is on the attacks and counterattacks that have been directed squarely against NATO.

Russian state-run, government-affiliated, and citizen-led media often propagate these three tropes about NATO:

1. Strategic stability is being jeopardised by NATO deployments near Russia's borders.
2. When it came to expanding to the east, NATO reneged on agreements.
3. Strategic stability is compromised by missile defence programmes directed against Russia.



Most NATO members have been investigating Russia's propagandistic activities with the participation of independent specialists, civic networks, and non-governmental organisations

Russian propaganda and misinformation also focused on the NATO expansion process. Some of the more illustrative instances are the following narratives:

1. During 2016–2017, when Montenegro's accession to NATO was discussed, the notion that "Montenegro is being dragged into NATO against the will of the people" was often deployed. Russia has spoken out against Montenegro joining NATO, and has promised retaliation against the small Balkan republic. Russian officials made statements before and after the accession talks, the Russian media reported that NATO was forcing Montenegro into membership, Russian spy agencies supported an unsuccessful *coup d'état* attempt against the then Prime Minister of Montenegro in October 2016, and Russia provided financial support to pro-Russian and anti-NATO political parties, NGOs, and the media.²⁰

18 Jens Stoltenberg, 'Keynote Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Opening of the NATO Transformation Seminar', NATO Transformation Seminar, 2015, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_118435.htm?selectedLocale=ru.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Reuf Bajrovik, Vesko Garcevic and Richard Kraemer, 'Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018; David Brunnstorm, 'Russia Threatens Retaliation as Montenegro Becomes 29th NATO Member', *Reuters*, 5.06.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nato-montenegro-idUSKBN18W2WS>.

2. The 2018 agreement between Skopje and Athens would rename Macedonia as the Republic of Northern Macedonia and make it the 30th member of the Alliance. Nevertheless, a similar argument was made against the pact. The Russian authorities have voiced strong resistance to any further Balkan expansion of NATO. Political figures at home and abroad were concerned that Russia would try to influence the outcome of the referendum in Macedonia over the country's controversial new name. The Russian authorities, as cited by the Russian media, have said that the referendum results were invalid, and that NATO has pulled Skopje into its circle.²¹

During the past four years, the NATO Press Office has seen a 300% rise in interest in NATO among journalists worldwide.²² There has been an uptick in exaggerated claims and misleading headlines in both Russian and Western media outlets.²³ Even the official NATO Twitter account has been subjected to cyber and troll attacks, with as many as 10,000 fake accounts following the account of the organisation's official spokesman.²⁴ Because of this, NATO has shifted its communication priorities, improved its strategic communication infrastructure, and launched new measures to fight Russian misinformation and propaganda. NATO does not respond to propaganda with more propaganda, but rather with facts and knowledge. NATO has a special website dubbed "Setting the record straight" where

they dispel some of Russia's most persistent falsehoods.²⁵ This site provides evidence-based responses to common myths about NATO by way of articles, films, infographics, and maps.

In response to the claim that NATO encircles Russia, the team, using a specially drawn map, illustrated that out of Russia's 14 neighbours with 20,000 km of borders, only five are members of NATO.²⁶ To effectively counter hybrid threats, collaboration with various stakeholders is essential. Because of this, NATO has expanded its efforts in collaborating with other international groups, to increase awareness of its surroundings and share information and best practices.

In addition to the steps resulting from the joint NATO-EU declaration, NATO is also involved in the European Centre of Excellence on Countering Hybrid Warfare in Helsinki, Finland, and the NATO Centre of Excellence on Strategic Communications in Riga, Latvia. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, all of which are in the path of Russian hybrid warfare and misinformation, get aid from NATO, as do Finland and Sweden. All of these countries have expertise in constructing highly resilient societies.²⁷ The Hybrid Warfare Platform developed between NATO and Ukraine is one such platform that allows for the sharing of knowledge and best practices to fight Russian propaganda.

21 Sarantis Michalopoulos, 'US-Russia Tensions Escalate over Greece, Macedonia Name Deal', Euractiv, 13.07.2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/us-russia-tensions-escalate-over-greece-macedonia-name-deal>.

22 'Newsroom', NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_room.htm.

23 Kathrin Wesolowski, 'Fact Check: Fake News Thrives amid Russia-Ukraine War 17.04.2022', DW, 28.04.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-fake-news-thrives-amid-russia-ukraine-war/a-61477502>.

24 Kelvin Chan, 'NATO Researchers: Social Media Failing to Stop Manipulation', AP NEWS, 29.04.2021, <https://apnews.com/article/social-media-technology-business-social-platforms-europe-0637e119414e7131955d4aa428466946>.

25 NATO, 'NATO-Russia: Setting the Record Straight', NATO, <https://nato-intl.com/?p=890>.

26 *Ibid.*

27 NATO, 'NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats', 16.03.2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm.

Strategic Communication Refinement

NATO officials recognise the need for coordinated communication in formulating and implementing strategic decisions. NATO has its own very effective, in-house Strategic Communications system that is utilised to promote the Alliance's political and operational aims daily. Although NATO's Strategic Communications is the overarching framework, their allies have also developed their own national systems and procedures to better represent their unique circumstances and interests. Combating propaganda and deception requires strong and effective strategic communication.

Strategic communications are defined by NATO as "the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims".²⁸

Because of the organisation's many elements, one of NATO's top priorities in terms of strategic communication is establishing a reliable system of coordinated communications, based on mutually accepted political choices. The Public Diplomacy Division at NATO HQ in Brussels has taken on innovative methods in its communications, to make the best use of its resources, by linking communications campaigns to specific policy goals. NATO has implemented a programme evaluation system and improved its analysis of the surrounding information technology infrastructure (ITI). The military command structures of NATO, and the larger NATO family, are interconnected in several different

ways, including via official and informal networks, operational level working groups, and strategic policy boards.

For this reason, ITI has developed as a powerful instrument of strategic communications. Several NATO allies and partners, in addition to NATO itself, are now working to improve their capabilities. Indicators and early warnings of hybrid activity, as well as the alliance's own communications strategy, make use of ITI analysis of the information environment.



NATO officials recognise the need for coordinated communication in formulating and implementing strategic decisions

With ITI, we may learn to navigate the increasingly cluttered and ever-changing digital information landscape. Many storylines and voices are vying for the attention of information consumers in today's crowded media landscape. This skill is more valuable than ever before in the age of fake news. It may assist NATO to modify its communication posture, by providing a real-time indication of the information environment in which it functions, via the monitoring, reporting, and analysis of both friendly and adversarial actions and intents.

Setting SMART goals,²⁹ establishing key narratives/themes/messages, selecting its target audiences, and finally monitoring and identifying its major channels of communication are all crucial to ITI's

28 NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence, 'StratCom | NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Riga, Latvia', https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-nato-stratcom-coe/5.

29 SMART objectives – Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant and Time bound.

approach, which is reminiscent of the traditional framework of a communication campaign.³⁰ From the most popular news outlets to the most obscure blogs, podcasts, and video streaming sites, not to mention the many social media channels and online forums, they may be as varied as an organisation wants or has the capacity to cover.³¹ Key patterns may be uncovered by the systematic accumulation of knowledge and data.

Concerning the 2016 decision at the NATO Warsaw Summit to deploy four multinational battalion-size battlegroups to Poland and the Baltic states as part of NATO's strengthened defence and deterrence posture, one well-researched example provides insights into both friendly and hostile information environments. The United States Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), which focuses on tracking and monitoring disinformation, issued a warning about a massive disinformation campaign on October 15th, 2017, in light of the impending United States deployment to Poland as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. According to RIA Novosti's quoting of a spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Defence: *"Amid the hysteria over Russia's planned military incursion right from the Zapad-2017 drills, the 2nd Armoured Division of the US arrived quietly in Poland and was deployed there [Boleslawiec, Drawsko Pomorskie, Torun, Skwierzyzna, Zagan] with its armoured vehicles... Contrary to the NATO and the US statements about the 'insignificance' of*

the troops being pulled towards the Russian border, there is now a de facto US Armed Forces division, not a brigade."³²

Although a division has at least 10,000 troops, the United States really sent a brigade combat team, which consisted of 1,500 to 3,500 men. Detailed information regarding the impending deployment has been made available in a fact sheet provided by the U.S. Army Europe Command.

As part of the Enhanced Forward Presence, NATO is sending troops to Poland and the Baltic nations. The DFRLab has performed an extensive study into Russian propaganda over this issue.

1. NATO is unwelcome.
2. NATO is providing material assistance to terrorists.
3. The Baltic Nations are outside of NATO's protection.

It was found out that some such stories, although having little overall impact, may have had a harmful effect on the local population. NATO and individual member-states that are either hosting NATO forces or sending their own troops would benefit greatly from this kind of study. They may better plan their own communication efforts, modify storylines and key messages as needed, and keep tabs on the information circulating in their area of influence. More and more studies, reports, and trends are being presented to the political and military

30 Joe Saballa, 'Lithuania Doubling Pace of Ukrainian Soldier Training', *The Defense Post*, 8.12.2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/12/08/lithuania-ukrainian-soldiers-training/>.

31 Akin Ünver and Ahmet Kurnaz, 'Securitization of Disinformation in NATO's Lexicon: A Computational Text Analysis', 11 in *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 2022.

32 DFRLab, 'Disinformation Deployed against "Atlantic Resolve"', *DFRLab*, 16.11.2017 <https://medium.com/dfrlab/disinformation-deployed-against-nato-enhanced-forward-presence-c4223f6d7466>; Also see OECD, 'OECD Policy Responses on the Impacts of the War in Ukraine – Disinformation and Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine Threats and Governance Responses', OECD, 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/>.

leadership of NATO and individual member states,³³ and they are feeding into the decision-making process.

Conclusion

The best way to combat misinformation and propaganda is via open and honest dialogue. Better strategic communication and decision-making may result from a deeper understanding of the information landscape in which international organisations and national governments function.

During the last seven decades, NATO has provided much-needed predictability in an otherwise chaotic world. According to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the Alliance's first duty is to defend its territory and its

citizens against any assault. NATO maintains the full spectrum of capabilities necessary to deter and defend against any threat to the safety and security of its populations, regardless of the form that threat may take, including hybrid threats, considering the extremely varied, complex, and demanding international security environment in which we all operate.

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33 Akın Ünver and Ahmet Kurnaz, 'Securitization of Disinformation in NATO's Lexicon: A Computational Text Analysis', in *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 2022.

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