

Narrative Led Operations¹

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Introduction

The concept of a strategic narrative has begun to resonate in International relations, communications and war studies, although with an emphasis on narratives role in Strategic Communication. Most of the discussions are communication centric and discusses narratives in the framework of Strategic Communication, Information Operations, Psychological Operations and to some extent Public Affairs (which mostly have been concerned with politics and domestic public consent) to minimize the so called “say – do gap” and winning the “Battle of Narratives”. Unfortunately on the premise that it is the communications that should be better planned, synchronized and coordinated in order to effectively employ the narrative – not the other way around, that it is the operations in their entirety that needs to be based on the narrative.

Little has therefore yet been discussed when it comes to the operationalization of narratives in military operations at the operational and tactical level and how a narrative can inform, and even direct, the Operational Planning Process and the conduct of operations in the future. The latter discussion must be at the heart of the issue for it to add any value to current military operations heavily influenced by the “fourth operational factor”³ – information – and the demands put on all operations to be transparent and legitimate in the eyes of the media, domestic, international or in theatre based audiences - all actors that continuously scrutinize our actions and seek to make sense of them in the framework of narratives in the information environment. At the end of the day perception of our actions will inform not just the domestic opinion but also potential protagonists and the undecided population’s behaviour - and human behaviour is what contemporary conflicts are all about.⁴

In a world where the use of the state’s or coalition’s “instruments of power”, especially the military one, are subject to intense political, media and public near to real time scrutiny there is an increased need for being able to continuously legitimise and compellingly convey (communicate) the reasons for state’s or coalition’s actions. Furthermore in a security environment, where more and more actions are conducted in ad hoc coalitions, the need for creating and communicating a shared meaning is imperative – despite of the political / diplomatic and military challenges. Words and deeds must match at all levels –

¹ The term Narrative Led Operations was first introduced in an article of the same name published in Small Wars Journal on the 17th of October 2012. See: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/narrative-led-operations-put-the-narrative-first>

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³ There has traditional been three operational factors are; Time, Space and Forces. Now a fourth – Information (to include cyber) – has been added.

⁴ See Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham: Behavioural Conflict (2012).

from strategic to tactical. It is within this context both the political driven “Strategic Narrative” and “Narrative Led Operations” must be seen. Particular attention must though be paid to the fact that what is relevant to domestic audiences, and therefore politicians, are not necessarily relevant to audiences in theatre of operations. A discrepancy between the levels of warfare that also must be addressed when discussing strategic narratives and Narrative Led Operations.

States or coalitions and their military forces do not, however, have a monopoly on creating and projecting narratives. Through the telling of interlinked stories that together forms the strategic narrative, their opponents, local and domestic audiences, media and for that matter their own soldiers all create and project narratives making the information environment saturated with competing and conflicting narratives - a competition that have been labelled the “Battle of Narratives”.

In recent years the “Battle of Narratives” has been used as a term referring to this extended competition. The “battle” is marked by efforts by competing nations, coalitions, entities or ideologies to frame the context of a conflict in a manner that influences key audiences to foster support for their actions and political objectives at all levels.⁵ The underlying assumption is that complex warfare is fought not only in the physical dimension of the battlefield but also in the cognitive, moral and for that matter legal dimension.⁶ And as the dimensions are interlinked and mutually supportive when it comes to the creation of perceptions, military operations have to be coherent with the strategic narrative in words and deeds.

In a punch line: “What the population thinks, says and how it acts (behaviour) is more important than how many tanks and airplanes they have”.⁷ Shaping the virtual battlefield and subsequently affecting the physical battlefield and thereby diverse audiences’ and actors’ decision-making processes is therefore of the outmost importance. By using narrative analysis (identification and analysis of existing narratives) and strategic narratives at the strategic level as an integral part of the strategy formulation process, therefore offers an effective guidance to the military planning process.⁸ As the above quotation suggests, the dominance of a particular narrative can shape the entire operating space and help determine the outcome of the military engagement. But only if the military engagement is coherent with the strategic narrative and directly supports it, as well as being sensitive to and playing into local existing narratives.

In the “Battle of Narratives” the role of technology and media is essential; both as a means to coordinate and mobilize otherwise dispersed groups of audiences and as an effective way to gain domestic, international and in theatre attention and support for political goals and military objectives. By using new media technologies to include social media to frame the context of the battle, as well as act and operate accordingly, actors can present themselves as moral subjects with legitimate claims and thereby shape the perceptions and behaviour of relevant audiences. This, and the fact that all tactical actions in the contemporary operation environment potentially have strategic effects, leads to the requirement for military forces to plan within the strategic narrative framework. The other

⁵ David Sadowski, *The Battle of Narratives – A Proposal*. IOShere, December 2012. Page 4 – 9.

⁶ In respect to the legal dimension this is also known as “Lawfare”. See Charles Dunlap; “Lawfare Today” (2008).

⁷ David Sadowski, *The Battle of Narratives – A Proposal*. IOShere, December 2012. Page 4 – 9.

⁸ Resent operations as NATO mission in Libya (Operation Unified Protector) in 2011 showed that strategy followed after the commence of military operations and the narrative therefore was developed after the fact.

way around strategic pronouncements – strategic narratives – now have direct and immediate influence at the tactical level. E.g. what is said in capitals about long term commitment to a mission has an immediate tactical impact on local perceptions of whether to side with local or coalition forces or not.

The Contemporary Operational Environment – and its Nature and Character

The statements might be interpreted as suggesting that kinetic forces is no longer necessary if we just get the narrative right! That is not the case! The nature of warfare is still the same. War is a messy thing basically about deterring or at the end of the day destroying your opponent's will and ability to wage warfare – directly (militarily) or indirectly (politically, economically or informational). The character of war is, however, ever changing mostly with the developments in technology but also in regards to norms and legal issues as well as the increasing power of information when it comes to shaping the outcome of conflicts. Hence the contemporary debate on narratives. Trying to describe the character of contemporary warfare and what influences it you therefore find that terms as legitimacy and credibility and issues as media and domestic, international, regional and local public opinion, attitude and behaviour are central. Or as Ben Zweibelson describes it: “Media organisations are decidedly neutral in conflicts, yet their narratives help shape the outcome of conflicts more than even the most powerful weapons are capable of.”⁹ The neutrality bit is though highly debatable as more and more news networks report events based on sentiments that frame their coverage. Nevertheless, does this alone call for a re-think of how we plan military operations? It is highly debated now, but in just a few years from now it might very well be mainstream thinking!

At a recent symposium Chief of US Army Forces Command General David M. Rodriguez in the Q&A after his key note address was asked the very simple question: “Sir, Should we start teaching Narrative Led Operations?” – His just as simple answer came without any hesitation – “Yes”.¹⁰

But why did he answer yes to this question related to a non-doctrinal and perhaps quite controversial concept so quickly?

Looking at bit more at the context in which most contemporary operations are conducted we find that the operational environment is increasingly complex. This complexity is the result of a whole array of factors mostly associated with the globalization of information and knowledge and more visible cultural differences. This also affords a wide range of actors with the possibility to actively try to influence and participate in, or be influenced by, armed conflicts and crisis. The military forces or units employed in crisis-management and stability operations therefor have to work in a complex context with many actors such as regular and irregular forces, asymmetric opponents, political actors, criminal organizations, international and non-government organizations, Medias and civilian populations. Nearly all the employments of military forces will be in populaces' areas and it will increasingly be the norm that military operations are conducted by smaller units – or even individuals -

⁹ Ben Zweibelson, What is Your Narrative, and Why? – How the Media, the Military, and the World Struggles with Telling the “Real Story” in Afghanistan. Small Wars Journal, October 15, 2011. Page. 13.

¹⁰ 17th International Command and Control Research and Technology Symposium (ICCRTS), sponsored by the Pentagons Command and Control Research Project (CCRP), Washington D.C., JUN 21, 2012.

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operating at the tactical level but with significant strategic implications.¹¹ The technological developments over the last decade and the speed with which information is shared worldwide through the internet and social network medias compressing time and space also have a huge impact on contemporary military operations. It also blurs the traditional boundaries between strategic and tactical level more often than not elevating tactical operations and events to strategic issues. The other way around tactical events is used by media, politicians and opponents to characterize and frame the entire campaign either positively or negatively to support a given narrative. These new security policy challenges often characterized by local conflicts becoming global challenges have amongst other things driven the development of the use of strategic narratives and highlighted their role on all levels of warfare.¹²

But has this increased awareness of the importance of narratives and information in crisis-management, counterinsurgency and other stability and security operations actually made any difference to how we plan and execute military operations? I would argue that it has not. Most military planning still depart from a classical approach to warfare and do not address the contemporary use of military force in the complex scenarios described above. If military planning does take the narrative into account, which is done to some extent in for an example Afghanistan, there is a tendency to phrase the narrative to fit what is going on operationally and tactically rather than letting the narrative inform these operations.

Furthermore, when it comes to the military and the use of narratives it becomes challenging! As Ben Zweibelson points out; “For military organisations, `narrative´ has become one of the new buzz-words where most do not understand it or confusing it with `strategic messaging´, `commanders intent´ and a wide host of other military processes that essentially demonstrate our fixation with admiring problems with the latest lexicon”.¹³ But before we can talk more about Narrative Led Operations we must look at the concept of narratives itself.

Narratives

There are many definitions on what a narrative is and which elements it is comprised of. At the very basic level it contains the elements “past, present and future” and can be described as; the story about the rationale, intent and aims – the “why” – of an organisation (or nation) that reflects the vision and strategy of the organisation (or nation), and, like a script or score, guides its mission conduct – the “how” of its overall activity. Especially the part about guiding the mission conduct is at the very heart of the issue. One definition we find in NATO's policy for Information Operations, where it is stated that a narrative is: “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”.¹⁴ Narratives have also been described as “the foundation of all strategy, upon which all

¹¹ See also Rupert Smith: *The Utility of Force*, and his discussion of “War Amongst People” (chapter 3). Individual actions that generate strategic effect are also known under the term “The Strategic Corporal”.

¹² US Joint Forces Command; *The Joint Operating Environment 2010*, US JFCOM, FEB 18, 2010, Page 4 – 12. And William J. Gregor: *Military Planning Systems and Stability Operations*, Prism 1, No. 3, JUN 2010, page 99 – 100.

¹³ Ben Zweibelson, *What is Your Narrative, and Why? – How the Media, the Military, and the World Struggles with Telling the “Real Story” in Afghanistan*. *Small Wars Journal*, October 15, 2011. Page 3.

¹⁴ MC 422/4 NATO Policy on Information Operations (2012). Working Definition.

else— policy, rhetoric, and action—is built.”¹⁵ Finally narrative has been defined as; “A narrative is a system of stories that share common themes, forms, events, and participants, and create expectations for how those elements can be assembled to satisfy a desire that is rooted on conflict”.¹⁶ The latter definition of a narrative indicated that a narrative is not just a single story, but several stories that together make up the narrative, and that all actions that make up an operation are “storied” and become part of a larger narrative that has communicative effect. Furthermore that the interaction between these stories are complex and can lead to unintended consequences that potentially can end up undermining the strategic narrative. To this comes the fact that antagonists and third parties also tell stories – deploy narratives – that become a part of the narrative system, which further complicates things and can erode the strategic narrative. Hence the emphasis on “narrative analysis” as this interference is something that should be anticipated and integrated in Narrative Led Operations: If we do “X”, what stories will this allow the antagonist and others to tell, and which frames can our actions be put into, and how this might affect the way we desire to portray the action?¹⁷

One thing that confuses the picture is though the seemingly interchangeable use of “narrative” and “story”. The two are different according to most literature on narratives, where the narrative is described as the overarching account and stories – or discourses – are supporting and can change over time or tailored to specific audiences based on their conditions, bias and current situation. There is therefore an important distinction to be made between “strategic narratives” and “local narratives” in theatres of operations. The two should be closely connected, but where the strategic narrative is politically driven, the deployment of it by a military force - or other entity - in theatre is target audience analysis and local narrative analysis driven. A key point here is also that it is imperative that a narrative is simple. Too many western strategic narratives are fare to complex and framed in equivocal diplomatic language. Unless the narrative is comprehensible by soldiers and audiences, also in theatre, it will be ignored.¹⁸

The purpose of a narratives is therefore to foster a shared understanding of who we (organisation or nation) are, what we do and why, where and when we operate and how we execute our mission. Effective narratives therefore contain a plot (meaning), and is supported by audience tailored stories – or discourses – connected to a certain theme or logic that ties the entire narrative together. Narratives also involve the use of metaphors as humans naturally relate new information to something familiar in order to make sense of it. Hence the different stories or discourses to different audiences to support the overall narrative. In this respect it is also important to keep in mind that the narrative and its supporting stories or discourses not only are about messages and images but to a high degree also about what meaning our actions convey and thereby what perceptions they create.

There is no doubt that different political agendas, social and cultural conditions and a variety of other factors generate a perceptual clash of narratives.¹⁹ The question is though why audiences prefer one narrative over another even though they are about the same

¹⁵ Michael Vlahos; Quoted in Amy Zalman: Narrative As An Influence Factor in Information Operations, IO Journal, Vol. 2, Issue 3, August 2010.

¹⁶ Jeffrey R Halverson, H. L. Goodall and Steven R. Corman: Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.

¹⁷ Mail interview with Professor Steven R. Corman, Centre for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University (6th of October 2012).

¹⁸ Mail interview with Brigadier Iain Harrison, UK Army (6th of October 2012).

¹⁹ Ben Zweibelson, What is Your Narrative, and Why? – How the Media, the Military, and the World Struggles with Telling the “Real Story” in Afghanistan. Small Wars Journal, October 15, 2011. Page 1.

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topic. It is fairly easy to differentiate between two competing actors' narratives, for an example between NATO's and the Taliban's narratives which is used to frame specific events in Afghanistan. It is, however, not so easy and much more complex when you also include NATO member states and other troop contributing nations, international organisations, international, regional and local media narratives as well as the narratives of local audiences and for that matter own troops.

It is in these muddy waters of competing narratives where the overwhelming majority of audiences and stakeholders are someone that we do not fight, but try to be in dialogue with and influence, that a strategic narrative provides us with the overarching guidance to achieve unity of effort.

The narrative helps provides the tone and guides the planning, decision-making, communication, and actions of every single member of the organisation - from strategic to tactical level. Every decision, operation, activity, and communication should first be compared to the narrative to ensure it is consistent with the overarching tone and intent of the strategic narrative.

The strategic narrative must be derived from and inform the theatre strategy developed at the political level and then be supported by the operations and actions on ground in theatre. Especially as it to a high degree is the accumulated sum of tactical operations and actions that make up the desired strategic outcome all these must be informed by and support the strategic narrative. In order to achieve this, our operational as well as the subsequent tactical level planning must happen within the narrative framework. The commander's intent and planning guidance to the staff and the staff's development of the Operational Design, selection of Course of Actions, Concept of Operation and Lines of Operations must fit within the narrative framework. Likewise, the following execution of operations on ground must provide proof of the strategic narrative in a visual way. This, thus, also means that our soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers must not only be trained and educated to use the narrative in planning and operations, they must also know and understand the strategic narrative and so to speak "live by it" in words and deeds. The aim with this is that all our operational planning and our operations are informed by and amplifies the strategic narrative giving us legitimacy and credibility and thereby influence in an ever more complex operational environment. It is in this context that that the concept of Narrative Led Operations must be seen.

Narrative Led Operations

Narrative Led Operations is about putting the narrative at the heart of the operational planning process and letting it inform the planning of both the kinetic and non-kinetic activities in order to support the strategic intent with the employment of military force as articulated in the strategic narrative.

The operations and battles we plan on engaging in must thus support the strategic narrative. The battles we are drawn into must during and after be framed to either support our own narrative or to counter that of our opponents. Operations must therefore be conducted within the narrative and not be allowed to contradict it even though a particular tactical action or execution of a target of opportunity might be what wins the day. Narrative Led Operations is therefore a question of linking what we say politically (theatre strategy) and what we do militarily in the theatre of operations. Militarily it is a question of ensuring that both operations and communications are planned and executed or framed within and in support of the strategic narrative for the mission or theatre of operations. When this is said, we must still be aware of the existence of situations where military necessity (i.e.

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force protection or the like) prescribes military actions that can be seen as contrary to the strategic narrative. In such cases a plan for mitigation must be in place.

The term narrative is already being used in a series of handbooks and doctrines on operational planning and operational design to amongst other things describe the operational environment. For an example in US Joint Staff's Planners Handbook for Operational Design; "The operational environment narrative captures a more detailed understanding of the relevant actors, their interactions, and relationships. When used in concert, a diagram and narrative become powerful tools".²⁰ Narrative is also used in the Handbook as a definition of the problem to be solved and then the basis for developing the operational approach; "A narrative problem statement that includes the required timing to solve the problem".²¹ The handbook finally describes a narrative as "A description of the operational approach in form of a combination of a narrative and graphics that describe end-state, objectives, desired conditions, and potential Lines of Operations and Lines of Efforts".²² The handbook thereby describes three different narratives in the operational planning; the operational environment narrative, the problem statement narrative and the operational approach narrative, but not that the strategic narrative have any influence on the planning from the beginning, or that the narrative frames the execution.

Looking at another planning publication, the US Army War College's Campaign Planning Handbook, you also find that it describes the operational environment narrative when stating that; "The "product" of the analysis of the current Operational Environment is a set of narratives that describe the important interests in the Operational Environment of the key actors. Though the narrative may be PMESII-based,²³ they go far beyond the baseline PMESII analysis to describe the dynamics of relationships of the critical aspects of the environment".²⁴ The publication also uses the term narrative to describe the operational approach when it states: "The Design Concept should include graphical representations and narrative descriptions of the logic behind the operational approach, and describe the operational approach".²⁵ Furthermore the handbook mentions what is called a mission narrative that it defines as; "Mission narrative that describes the "story" of the operational approach. This narrative expresses to external stakeholders desired effects for the mission to help shape their perceptions that are relevant to the campaign".²⁶ Finally the handbook describes the Commanders Intent as a narrative; "The Commander's Intent is a concise narrative describing the key aspects of his understanding of the environment and the problem and his visualization of how the campaign must progress to achieve the desired end state".²⁷ Finally it describes how narratives can be used to describe Cause of Actions and the output from the war-gaming.²⁸

²⁰ Joint Staff J-7: Planners Handbook on Operational Design, Joint Staff, J-7, Joint and Coalition Warfighting

Suffolk, Virginia, 7 October 2011, page V-15.

²¹ Ibid, page VI-6.

²² Ibid, Page VI-6.

²³ PMESII is a model to describe the operational environment covering the factors; Politics, Military, Economics, Information and the associated infrastructure.

²⁴ US Army War College: Campaign Planning Handbook, Academic Year 2012, United States Army War College

Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, United States. Page 31.

²⁵ Ibid, page 39.

²⁶ Ibid, page 39.

²⁷ Ibid, page 66.

²⁸ Ibid, page 90.

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Both the handbooks thereby describes several different narratives and how they can be used to articulate different aspects of the planning process and the intent to internal (both subordinates and superiors alike) as well as external stakeholder. The output from the planning process therefore contains multiple narratives – not a single unifying one that in itself can be used as direction and guidance for planning and execution of operations as well internally as externally.

Furthermore, neither of the handbooks do describe how strategic narratives can inform the commanders intent and planning guidance and the subsequent planning process to ensure the needed coherence between the strategic narrative and the operations on ground.

So even though the term narrative is used in the two planning handbooks, as well as in doctrines and field manuals on design and planning, the use is not consistent with the evolving theory of the relation between narratives, strategy and operations or offer a coherent “mission narrative” as the output from the planning process.

A somewhat different perspective on narratives in operations is to be found in developing UK doctrine on both strategic communication and operational planning²⁹. Here you find that the “strategic narrative” and what is called “Information Effect” are the pivotal elements in the operational planning and in achieving the desired influence on events and thereby change of conditions. Based on a comprehensive estimate a commander articulates a “theory of change” guided by the strategic narrative. The theory of change outlines the operational concept to include an assessment of risks as well as capabilities and the sustainment of the forces’ legitimacy. The latter is of cause of particular interest when it comes to the strategic narrative.

Even though the quote below from the UK doctrine on Campaign Planning talks about strategic communication and the top down direction that strategic narrative provides on this it still clarifies a very important link between the strategic intent (words) and the actions on ground to tangible prove the strategic narrative. Thus, the strategic narrative directs the deeds on ground. *“Strategic communication is defined as advancing national interests by using all Defence means of communication to influence the attitudes and behaviours of people. It is primarily a philosophy, partly a capability and part process. Philosophy is the key element since it underpins the alignment of words, images and actions to realise influence. The CDS [Chief of Defence Staff] Planning and Operational directives will articulate the desired information effect to the JFC [Joint Force Commander], who will deliver the operational level military contribution as part of the wider cross-government strategic communication for a campaign or operation. This should be articulated through a strategic narrative, or where additional focus is required, a MOD [Ministry of Defence] departmental narrative from which the JFC will derive his key themes and messages. In this way the JFC ensures that the words of strategic communication are matched by the deeds of the joint force”.*³⁰

Furthermore the doctrine elaborates on the relation between the comprehensive estimate, the “theory of change” and the direction provided by the strategic narrative. Implicitly the estimate must account for existing local narratives and take these into account in formulating the theory of change.

“The estimate provides the intellectual underpinning to the commander’s insight and vision. It allows both the commander and his staff to think creatively about the achievement of the objectives set. It is enabled by the collective skill, knowledge and experience

²⁹ Respectively Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 12/1 Strategic Communication and Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 5-00 Campaign Planning.

³⁰ UK Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 5-00 Campaign Planning, paragraph 215

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of the commander and his staff to design and manage the campaign, and to employ military forces. Command-led, the estimate supports the JFC in developing his theory of change of how the operation will achieve the desired end-state and the information effect that is specified in CDS' Planning and Operational Directives. The theory of change is the commander's big idea of how the operation will change the current operational conditions to the future desired conditions and will be guided by the strategic narrative".³¹

Based on the different approaches to using narratives internally in the US planning and design publications and the UK approach to taking direction from the strategic narrative, the basis for Narrative Led Operations can be derived and lead us to a definition of the concept.

Definition: "Narrative Led Operations are the purposeful strategic narrative led analysis, planning and execution of operations for the purpose of creating a clear linkage between the strategic intent and the campaign design in order to ensure that the words of the political level are matched by the deeds, images and words of the Joint Force".

This emphasis on the strategic narrative and the influence on the subsequent planning processes of course have some implications.

Implications for Operational Planning

Based on the premise that a commander receives not only a mission or task but also an accompanying strategic narrative, Narrative Led Operations starts with the commander's intent which then again drives the operational planning process. To give the narrative the primacy needed the commander's intent and in the planning process the narrative must be stated in the very beginning of higher levels planning directive, ideally right after the mission statement, just as the commander in his intent should articulate not only in physical effects but also in informational effects to be achieved.

Prior to the commander stating his intent and planning guidance a comprehensive PMESII based analysis of the operational and information environment must, however, be conducted to inform the rest of the process. This includes an analysis of existing narratives in the operational / information environment.³²

Narrative Led Operations are command-led, but "mission command" must, however, still apply.³³ That the strategic narrative informs and guides the operational planning and execution of operations and actions does not preclude the delegation of authority for decentralized execution. On the contrary! In order for the words (communication) and deeds (operations/actions) to be convincing and intrinsically believable to all audiences they must be contextualized and framed in local terms and play into local narratives, within a context of a long-term view. This requires agility, empowerment and acceptance of risk.

Narrative Led Operations therefore means that traditional fires and manoeuvre operations must be designed to support the narrative, instead of vice versa. In other words the given mission and subsequent the commanders mission statement, intent and operational

³¹ UK Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 5-00 Campaign Planning, paragraph 248

³² This though requires that a nation (government) or military has the resources and capacity to scan the horizon for areas of likely conflicts - where the nation or government would likely bring its instruments of power to bear - so that the analysis is credible and immediately available to inform operational planning!

³³ Mission Command; "through mission command, commanders generate freedom of action for subordinates to act purposefully when unforeseen developments arise, and exploit favourable opportunities". (NATO Allied Joint Publication AJP-01(D), page 6-3 and 6-4). Mission Command is also defined as: "The conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based on mission-type orders" in the US DoD Dictionary of Military Terms.

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design must be informed and guided by the narrative. Subordinate formations and units must “live out” the narrative in the context in which they operate. Ultimately, the commander at any given level determines the optimal way to execute his given task within the restraint and constraints that the narrative set up.

To this end Narrative Led Operations have both an internal and an external function. Internally it is a tool for the commander to communicate their assessment of the environment, the threats and opportunities it presents, key actions the force could take to exploit those opportunities and payoff (benefits) and associated risks such key actions could cause framed within the strategic narrative. It informs the development of Causes of Action and Lines of Operations to include both physical fires and manoeuvres and supporting Information Activities, e.g. Information Operations and Public Affairs. Furthermore it will internally guide education and training, troop information and coordination instructions in regards to own forces behaviour to ensure that PPP (Presents, Posture and Profile) is in line with the narrative. Externally it informs and educates the various relevant partners and stakeholders whose perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent behaviour are pertinent to the mission.

The bottom line is as the JFCOM study “The Joint Operating Environment 2010” (JOE) states “Dominating the narrative of any operation, whether military or otherwise, pays enormous dividends. Failure to do so undermines support for policies and operations, and can actually damage a country’s reputation and position in the world.”³⁴ This quote is underpinned by then commander of JFCOM general James Mattis’s statement on future approaches to operational design; “The complex nature of current and projected challenges requires that commanders routinely integrate careful thinking, creativity, and foresight. Commanders must address each situation on its own terms and in its political and strategic context rather than attempting to fit the situation to a preferred template”.³⁵ The political and strategic context he refers to is in this context the strategic narrative. Furthermore, the prerequisite for the JOE quote is articulate in a UK lesson identified statement based on experiences from Iraq and Afghanistan; “We should empower all military and civilian staff to compete, with discipline, in the information communication environment against those who oppose us; this approach will require leadership, less reference to higher authority and changes in our education and training.”³⁶

Conclusions

Given the current operational environment, and all its political and informational restraints and constraints, there is a need for giving the psychological domain and especially narratives – both the strategic and local existing ones – primacy in the operational planning process. This means that an enhanced understanding of systems and actors in order to create a shared understanding of the operational environment and its links to the strategic framework is essential for the planning and execution of operations. In respect to execution of operations it is essential that all means are considered equal – both kinetic and non-kinetic ones. This requires an emphasis on the analysis and appreciation of the operational and information environment before Courses of Action and Lines of Operation are considered to ensure that they are in line with and support the strategic narrative and

³⁴ US Joint Forces Command; The Joint Operating Environment 2010, US JFCOM, FEB 18, 2010, Page 59.

³⁵ General James Mattis, Commander of US Joint Forces Command, Memorandum; Vision for a Joint Approach to Operational Design, October 6, 2009.

³⁶ UK Doctrinal Note: “Study of Engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan”.

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plays into the existing local narratives, to include using the narrative as a guiding parameter in the war-gaming of plans.

This does, however, require acceptance of restraints and constraints on the operational planning put in place by strategic narrative – or basically political considerations – and thereby also limitations on the operational and tactical commander's freedom in determining the operational approach. It also requires acceptance of planning parameters that are not objective driven and that the execution of operations and actions requires empowerment to the very lowest levels in order to “live out” the narrative and thereby acceptance of risk. All, at the end of the day, to ensure that the operations we conduct are in line with the strategic narrative.