



THE CASE FOR NARRATIVE-LED OPERATIONS IN THE CAF

Major Christopher M.F. Ward

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Major Christopher M.F. Ward

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THE CASE FOR NARRATIVE-LED OPERATIONS IN THE CAF

Aim

1. The aim of this service paper is to look at the concept of narrative-led operations in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and how staffs at the operational level should approach the planning process going forward. In today's complex information environment, it will be imperative that Joint Effects planners define the unifying narratives for an operation or campaign so that plans and ops staffs can better align the tasks and activities required to achieve comprehensive effects. The coordination and synchronization of activities to a centralized narrative across the strategic, operational, and tactical levels will produce more effective and efficient results across the five domains, and within the information environment.

Introduction

2. The current planning process in Canada begins when a crisis escalates towards conflict, leading to a posture where the options to respond are limited in time and space. In addition, plans and campaigns tend to have a defined start and an end where activities will cease and forces will redeploy back to their home stations. The lack of enduring narratives, and actions that support and reinforce that narrative represent a critical vulnerability to the reliability and legitimacy of the CAF and Government of Canada (GC) in the information environment. The ability to harness and leverage narratives and strategic communications (STRATCOM) to inform and influence identified audiences about CAF and GC activities is a force multiplier when it comes to amplifying their actions.

3. Compressed response timelines result in the rapid deployment of high-readiness forces to respond, with narrative and messaging considerations determined during the deployment and in an ad-hoc or unaligned manner. This "cart before the horse" approach creates confusion and ambiguity, while preventing the CAF from efficiently exploiting and amplifying their activities and successes in the information environment. Initiating the planning process as early as possible with a clear, concise, and unifying narrative, will enable the five domains to focus, align, and synchronize their activities in a force-multiplying fashion. That central narrative will drive and define the types of activities each domain will need to undertake, and will ensure alignment to the strategic and national-strategic objectives the CAF is tasked with undertaking.

Discussion

4. Warfare today is complex, and spans not just the physical dimension, but the cognitive, moral, and even legal dimensions¹. These are integrated and mutually supporting, and must be leveraged holistically to deliver targeted effects across the continuum of conflict. The rapid evolution of technology, and low-cost barriers to access global audiences have levelled-out any equipment-based advantages that Western and near-peer militaries may have enjoyed in the past. The proliferation of information has also blurred the division between strategic and tactical

¹ Nissen, 'Narrative Led Operations'. 68

activities², where senior officials are expected to provide immediate comment or insight on events that may have only occurred minutes earlier. Recognition of the role and importance of information and communications in future engagements has become much more important than just the physical capabilities those militaries can bring to the fight. Narratives and STRATCOM should therefore be the primary considerations when conducting any military activity.

*We must realize that as a nation everything we say, everything we do, and everything we fail to say or to do, will have its impact in other lands. It will affect the minds and wills of men and women there*³.

5. STRATCOM represents the ability to understand the information environment and its audiences, while using all means of communication (actions, images, and words) to inform and influence behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions within those groups to achieve strategic end states⁴. Audience-centric planning, guided by an engaging and relatable narrative to drive appropriate activities is the essence of narrative-led operations. Within NATO, the STRATCOM function is defined as: "...the integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the information environment, in support of NATO strategic aims and objectives"⁵.

6. The speed and reach of communications today, and the power of perception among audiences mean that the first party to share information gets to set the narrative. Countering an existing narrative is an uphill battle that can quickly be overcome by events, or by the audience becoming disinterested. It is therefore imperative that the CAF be poised to communicate first, with factual information, in order to define the narrative.

- a. Allied Joint Doctrine 10 – *Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications* highlights the important components of the narrative, and what role it must play in order to be effective throughout an operation. It "provides the framework to cohere all political, military, and civilian personnel's activities, instruments of powers, levels of operations, operational domains and joint operation areas"⁶. At its core, the narrative is a story (with an arc) that incorporates a plot, archetypes (characters), associations, imagery, values, and emotions⁷ in a way that connects and resonates with a multitude of audiences. Narratives "explain the rationale for conducting an activity and the outcome sought, in a short, memorable manner, to build understanding, support and perceptions of legitimacy"⁸. Elements important to communicating the narrative include: the story (and the effectiveness of the

² Ibid. 69

³ Osgood, 'Form before Substance'. 417

⁴ UK Ministry of Defence, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications'. 3

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. 28

⁷ Waldman, 'Pilot for Operationalizing Narrative Using the Narrative Pyramid Model (Draft)'.

⁸ UK Ministry of Defence, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications'. 28

plot), discourse (the means, mediums and timing used to express the story), coherence (how well a story hangs together), and fidelity (how well it resonates with other stories we already know)⁹. The narrative that is provided or created should remain the central and unifying document when planning, analyzing, or executing any activity or when generating effects.

*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*¹⁰.

- b. Narrative-led operations or operationalization of the narrative provide the context and ability to quickly communicate activities. Centralized planning at the highest level to determine the narrative, and decentralized execution (in-line with the established narratives) permit the greatest flexibility when it comes to rapid and timely communications. The legitimacy of CAF operations rests with words matching deeds at all levels.
- c. Narratives will need to retain some flexibility to be modified and adapted accordingly to suit the level of operation or as the situation evolves. When these changes occur, it is important to consider that the alignment of activities reflect the words and stories communicated to the audiences. There are three distinct types of narratives relevant to NATO¹¹.
 - i. Institutional Narrative. This can be viewed as the national strategic narrative, which is a broad explanation of Canada's stance, views, and purpose on the world stage. While not always explicitly stated, it can be derived from policies, relationships, and actions and could involve themes such as: reliable partner/ally, promoter of the rules-based international order (RBIO), committed to peacekeeping, a defender of human rights, etc...
 - ii. Strategic Narrative. This is more focussed on an organization or group's rationale for conducting activities to seek out strategic outcomes, and is developed at the highest level responsible for the activity¹². It is an essential component of the planning process, which must cohere to the institutional narrative so as not to contradict or undermine it.

⁹ Finlayson and Corman, 'The Military Interest in Narrative'. 174, 178

¹⁰ Nissen, 'Narrative Led Operations'. 75

¹¹ UK Ministry of Defence, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications'. 29

¹² Ibid.

- iii. Micro Narrative. These address short and mid-term objectives at the tactical level. While these must also align with the strategic narrative, it is essential that micro narratives are coordinated horizontally across flanking organizations so that contradicting messages are not sent to different audiences¹³.

7. The CAF's recent release of the pan-domain force employment concept (PFEC) has sought to identify ways, means, and ends to work across the five domains of land, maritime, air, space, and cyber. A layering of these domains ensures that threats are identified and addressed in a more comprehensive manner. A persistent presence in all domains is also now required, necessitating the need for long-term planning and execution, or campaigning. There are no longer any single domain problems therefore, single-domain solutions will not be suitable to respond to increasingly complex environments. Narratives can exist independently regardless of the domain they are being employed in.

- a. Within the PFEC are a list of fourteen elements that address the imperatives of the strategic and operational contexts. Specific to narrative-led operations and pan-domain synchronization, there are a few to note. An **Integrated Operational Approach** to fully understand and act against the fully array of threats and challenges¹⁴, **Conscious Action** to generate messages that are aligned, coherent, and deliberate with the narrative and strategic objectives¹⁵, **Pan-Domain Integration** to act across all domains, dimensions, and environments¹⁶, and **Spatial Coherence** to bring actions and messages together across the operating environment at home and abroad¹⁷.
- b. Campaigning is an evolution of existing campaign planning. In-line with our adversaries, who do not differentiate between war and peace, and instead view a continuum of cooperation, competition, and conflict that can happen simultaneously in many different areas, Canada must adopt a longer-term view of planning to address the rise in global instability. The campaigning approach must rely on enduring high-level narratives that all government departments can employ to inform their operations and activities. An ongoing and persistent planning effort can be synchronized across the GC to better align all levers of national power to address global and domestic challenges.

8. The structures to enable narrative-led operations and planning already exist in today's CAF, but can be better leveraged to develop and align narratives to enhance results and effects sought.

¹³ Ibid. 30

¹⁴ National Defence, 'Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept: Prevailing in a Dangerous World'. 7

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

- a. The Strategic Joint Staff (SJS), the Director-General Strategic Effects and Readiness (DGSER) and the Director of Strategic Effects and Targeting (DSET) are responsible for developing the strategic narratives within the CAF, along with coordinating with other DND L1s, and OGDs.
- b. The Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) contains the Director of Joint Targeting and Effects (DJTE) that can take the strategic guidance and narratives, and begin planning and executing operational effects, leveraging the suite of information-related capabilities (IRCs) within the CAF, and coordinating with other action arms external to the CAF and the Department.
- c. Elements at the tactical level represent the force employers who conduct the activities that will be communicated to identified audiences. While most of these IRCs could include specialty capabilities that include cyber, EW, PSYOPS, Naval information warfare, etc..., routine activities such as CIMIC, key-leader engagements (KLE), and the presence/posture/profile of deployed troops can be aligned, coordinated, and synchronized to produce effects in the information environment.
- d. While the structures within CAF exist to enable narrative-led planning and operations, the processes and relationships to implement this approach have not been fully cultivated or formalized. Part of this issue lies with a lack of consistent GC direction in-terms of STRATCOM priorities, narratives, and authorities to actively compete in the information environment. The centralized control of information over recent governments has also hindered the CAF's ability to be the first to communicate and set the narrative. In most cases the CAF must resort to countering existing narratives, engaging in a battle of narratives, or risk being irrelevant to an event by not communicating at all.

9. Implementation of a narrative-led approach, or the alignment of activities to a narrative will not happen immediately. The proposed method below will require a fundamental shift in how staffs analyze, define, and scope the types of activities that will be required to support strategic narratives and achieve the desired effects.

- a. Phase 1 – Establish a STRATCOM Baseline. The CAF must immediately define and codify the strategic and operational narratives that are relevant to our current operations and tasks, and distribute that to the force. Leaders at all levels will then need to understand how their existing activities align and synchronize to those narratives, and develop plans to message and communicate every activity to relevant audiences. There is no need to cancel or reset CAF activities at this time.

- b. Phase 2 – Test and Adjust. Once leaders are comfortable with understanding how their actions are being received and perceived by target audiences, both the activities and the narratives can be adjusted to better suit the situation and the desired outcomes. This will avoid wholesale changes to either area, and will be more flexible as the information environment evolves.
- c. Phase 3 – Achieving Narrative-led Operations. The final step will see planning processes at all levels commence with a thorough review and understanding of the narrative environment and relevant audiences, in order to develop activities and tasks that will be synchronized and aligned across all domains, WoG, and allies and partners (A&P). This will realize the full potential of CAF resources, ensuring their most efficient use to arrive at desired effects. Messaging and communication of all activities will be central to the legitimacy and effectiveness of both the CAF and GC strategic objectives and end states.

10. *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (Canada’s defence policy) has noted a rise in grey zone and hybrid warfare tactics used by nation states and non-state actors alike to deliberately spread disinformation to sow confusion and discord, create ambiguity and maintain deniability¹⁸. Increased activity in the Indo-Pacific (IP), and the release of Canada’s IP Strategy has also sought to paint a picture of China’s ambitions in the region, and how Canada can compete against it¹⁹. The use of narratives to set the conditions for CAF activities in the grey zone, and explain it to audiences in a timely and coherent manner, will be critical for success going forward.

11. It is important to remember that the CAF is only one lever of the DIME (Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic) construct for national power, and therefore its capabilities and activities should be viewed as a part of much larger Whole of Government (WoG) system. Even if the CAF can leverage narrative-led operations and effective STRATCOM to align, synchronize, and amplify its activities; situations, crises, and conflict will require concurrent engagement with the other levers of national power. WoG coordination is required to address the constant threats our adversaries pose to us in the social, political, and economic spheres, and not just limited to the military-focussed threat²⁰. This coordination also extends to collaborating with our A&P, who are able to promote and amplify messages where narratives align as part of a broader allied effort²¹. Integration across all capabilities, domains, and instruments of national power must inform our planning and command and control (C2) efforts, which must evolve to address the complexities of today’s operating environment²². A top-down approach, starting with the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) to define national-strategic interests and the corresponding narrative(s) will be required to inform government departments of the direction the nation will

¹⁸ National Defence, ‘Strong Secure Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy’. 53

¹⁹ Global Affairs Canada, ‘Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy’.

²⁰ National Defence, ‘Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept: Prevailing in a Dangerous World’. 21

²¹ Ibid. 22

²² Ibid. 27

take. This will be distilled into relevant strategic narratives within those departments, and on through the micro narratives at the operational and tactical levels.

Conclusion

12. Planning of traditional fires and manoeuvre operations must be conceived to align and support the narrative, and not the other way around²³. Enabling narrative-led operations within the CAF and DND will require a fundamental shift in how it approaches the planning process. A focus on the information environment and STRATCOM, along with the development and distribution of engaging and relatable narratives will lead to relevant activities within the CAF that drive predictable outcomes to influence audience's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. Considering how CAF activities align to higher-level narratives will lead to more meaningful action, where the deeds will match the words.

13. The speed and volume associated with today's information and communication environments demands that the CAF (and GC writ-large) be proactive and anticipatory in planning activities that align with their strategic and national-strategic interests. That speed and complexity mean that audiences are more interested in how something is perceived as opposed to what the truth may be. Aligning and synchronizing activities, and being the first to connect that to the narrative, will ensure favourable shaping and effects that are in-line with strategic interests and end-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*²⁴.

Recommendation

14. The CAF must prioritize the development of strategic narratives to address all areas in which they are conducting operations and activities. These narratives must then be introduced at the commencement of any planning effort regardless of size, scale, or level, and remain a central and guiding document to inform all activities, tasks, and effects that will be developed. The adoption of narrative-led operations should not be expected immediately, given the uniqueness and complexity of the CAF's operations worldwide. The phased approach introduced in para 9 should be considered to gradually implement narrative-led operations into the CAF planning process.

²³ Nissen, 'Narrative Led Operations'. 75

²⁴ US Joint Forces Command, 'The Joint Operating Environment 2010'. 59

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