

# Certain Characteristics of Strategic Communication in Armed Conflicts over the Past Decades

Péter TORDA<sup>1</sup> 

*This article argues a discrepancy between the low degree of interest afforded to military disciplines in strategic communication research and the high degree of significance of strategic communication to modern military practice. A relatively low number of scholarly articles have been published in the field of strategic communication which focus on military disciplines, with most of them being empirical studies addressing research objects on the frontiers of military science. Meanwhile, strategic communication has become increasingly central to military practice in the post-1990 period, as seen in armed conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine.*

**Keywords:** *strategic communication, military science, military practice, armed conflict, modern warfare*

## Introduction

In the past decades, we have seen a *boom* in strategic communication, both as a “global field of communication research”<sup>2</sup> and as a line of practice. Even though the very concept of strategy originates from military theory<sup>3</sup> and strategic communication has firm roots in the military domain,<sup>4</sup> military science and its disciplines seem to have had limited impact on the evolution of strategic communication as a discipline. This assumed insufficiency of attention afforded to military science in strategic communication scholarship stands in contrast with the assumption of a steadily growing significance of strategic communication as part of military practice in armed conflicts over the past decades.

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<sup>1</sup> PhD student, University of Public Service, Doctoral School of Military Sciences, e-mail: [torda.peter@stud.uni-nke.hu](mailto:torda.peter@stud.uni-nke.hu)

<sup>2</sup> NOTHHAFT et al. 2018a: 329.

<sup>3</sup> NOTHHAFT–SCHÖLZEL 2015: 18–33.

<sup>4</sup> NÉMETH 2021a: 17.

## Hypotheses and methodology

To analyse the evolving nexus of strategic communication, military science and armed conflict in the past thirty years, I am proposing two hypotheses:

**H1:** The perspective and objects of military science are largely absent from research on strategic communication.

**H2:** Strategic communication as a practice has become increasingly central to armed conflicts since the beginning of the 1990s.

To prove or disprove the above hypotheses, I have applied the method of literature review and content analysis.

To explore the integration of military disciplines into strategic communication research (H1), I performed a full-text search using the term “military” in the International Journal of Strategic Communication (IJSC) as well as the Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication (RHSC).<sup>5</sup>

While the work published in IJSC is not a complete representation of strategic communication research production, it is the only academic journal in the world dedicated to strategic communication. In addition, IJSC provides the only continuously produced academic source from which to draw longitudinal data regarding the breadth and scope of scholarship in strategic communication.<sup>6</sup>

The RHSC is the most complete edited volume to aggregate knowledge from strategic communication research.

To analyse the integration of strategic communication as a practice in the military domain through recent decades (H2), I reviewed literature in those three online databases of the Library of the University of Public Service which contained the highest combined number of publications indexed in the research fields of security studies and military science:<sup>7</sup> the Oxford Academic Journals, the Taylor and Francis Online and the JSTOR databases. I performed full-text searches and follow-up snowball searches using relevant terms.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> HOLTZHAUSEN–ZERFASS 2015.

<sup>6</sup> PAGE WERDER et al. 2018: 347.

<sup>7</sup> As of 3 May 2021 ([www.uni-nke.hu/konyvtar/adatbazis-ajanlok/kutatasi-terulethez-javasolt-adatbazisok](http://www.uni-nke.hu/konyvtar/adatbazis-ajanlok/kutatasi-terulethez-javasolt-adatbazisok)).

<sup>8</sup> The following search terms were used: “Gulf War” and “Iraq” and “strategic communication”; “Iraq” and “invasion” and “strategic communication”; “Iraq” and “war” and “strategic communication”; “Afghanistan” and “war” and “strategic communication”; “global war on terror” and “strategic communication”; “ISIS” and “strategic communication”; “Russia” and “Ukraine” and “strategic communication”; “Russia” and “Crimea” and “strategic communication”.

## Defining strategic communication: Communication scholarship and military conceptualisation

Before moving on to examining the hypotheses proposed in this article, it is necessary to outline the contours of the concept of strategic communication, both from the perspective of communication and of military science.

From the viewpoint of strategic communication research, the seminal definition describes the concept as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”.<sup>9</sup> Synthetising the results of a decade of subsequent research in the field, a more elaborate definition of strategic communication has been proposed to “encompass all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals”.<sup>10</sup>

However, and notwithstanding the explanatory power of these definitions, strategic communication has been described as an “emerging interdisciplinary paradigm”<sup>11</sup> and an “elusive concept”.<sup>12</sup> There is broad agreement among scholars about the integrated and interdisciplinary<sup>13</sup> nature of strategic communication, with “interdisciplinary integration representing the greatest challenge for strategic communication scholarship in the future”.<sup>14</sup> Different variations have been put forward to identify the root disciplines unified by the progressively growing body of knowledge on strategic communication. A non-exhaustive list of constitutive disciplines associated with strategic communication includes management, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication and information/social marketing campaigns,<sup>15</sup> advertising, corporate communication, organisational communication,<sup>16</sup> health and intercultural communication,<sup>17</sup> as well as communication and media science.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, disciplines which seek scientific and technological answers to the subject matter of strategic communication have been added to the list of root disciplines, including computer linguistics, data science, cognitive science and neurobiology.<sup>19</sup>

As regards the conceptualisation of strategic communication in the (Western) military domain, the Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communication states that:

All aspects of the Western military alliance’s activities have a critical information and communications component. This concept proposes that strategic communications is not an

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<sup>9</sup> HALLAHAN et al. 2007: 3.

<sup>10</sup> ZERFASS et al. 2018: 493.

<sup>11</sup> PAGE WERDER et al. 2018: 333–351.

<sup>12</sup> NOTHHAFT et al. 2018b: 352–366.

<sup>13</sup> PAGE WERDER et al. 2018: 347.

<sup>14</sup> PAGE WERDER et al. 2018: 349.

<sup>15</sup> HALLAHAN et al. 2007: 3.

<sup>16</sup> O’CONNOR–SHUMATE 2018: 399.

<sup>17</sup> NOTHHAFT et al. 2018a: op. cit. 329.

<sup>18</sup> NOTHHAFT et al. 2018b: op. cit. 355.

<sup>19</sup> NOTHHAFT et al. 2018b: op. cit. 356.

adjunct activity, but should be inherent in the planning and conduct of all military operations and activities. As part of the overarching [sic!] political-military approach to Strategic Communications within NATO, the vision is to put Strategic Communications at the heart of all levels of military policy, planning and execution, and then, as a fully integrated part of the overall effort, ensure the development of a practical, effective strategy that makes a real contribution to success. [...] In accordance with NATO Policy, NATO Strategic Communications is the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PsyOps), as appropriate – in support of alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims.<sup>20</sup>

One of the salient questions in conceptualising strategic communication in the military field relates to which types of actions are considered to constitute strategic communication. In certain interpretations, “not only messages or communicative interactions belong to strategic communication, but also the actions of people, because they also communicate, and consequently constitute organizational life as such and thus constitute strategy”.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, it has been argued from a military scholarly standpoint that strategic communication “should not be limited to formal messages, while actions also convey meaning and should, therefore, also be part of strategic communication. What we do is often more important than what we say”.<sup>22</sup> The notion that people's actions in organisations may also amount to strategic communication takes on a special meaning in the military context where individual actions may easily become matters of life and death. The concept of the *era of the strategic corporal*<sup>23</sup> is one reflection of this viewpoint.

## **Integrating military science into strategic communication research**

A full-text search using the term “military” in the IJSC lists 56 manuscripts published over the 2007–2022 period, while the same search lists 10 manuscripts published in the RHSC. This is out of a total of 354 manuscripts published in the IJSC in the period 2007–2022, while the RHSC contains 38 publications overall.

### ***Content analysis of the International Journal of Strategic Communication***

Forty-seven of the 56 articles listed in the IJSC do not have their disciplinary focus anchored in military science. However, some of these publications contain references to

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<sup>20</sup> NATO: Military concept for NATO strategic communication (<https://info.publicintelligence.net/NATO-STRATCOM-Concept.pdf> cited in ZERFASS et al. 2018: 489).

<sup>21</sup> VAN RULER 2018: 376.

<sup>22</sup> PAUL 2011: 28 cited in VAN RULER 2018: 373.

<sup>23</sup> NÉMETH 2021b: 130.

research objects in the military domain. In the very first issue of the IJSC, it is stated that “the U.S. government recognizes strategic communication as a critical element in public diplomacy and in military intervention in troubled areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan”.<sup>24</sup> And, in another reference to the military domain in the same article, it is posited that strategic communication research “can be informed by looking beyond the bounds of traditional communications disciplines to include such diverse activities as public diplomacy, psychological operations by the military, and social marketing”.<sup>25</sup> More detailed references are made to objects of military research in a 2018 article, which states that “there is an old but increasing interest in communication in the context of military and national power”.<sup>26</sup> It goes on to state that:

Interestingly, strategic communication as an integral element of warfare is widely neglected by communication science, probably due to the negative notions of information warfare and propaganda. However, it has gained new attention in the context of terrorism and counterterrorism [...] The same is true for public diplomacy as a more “civilized” way of exercising soft power through global and intercultural communication. These topics resonate well in communication science [...] and show first signs of an institutionalization of their own. [...] In the real world, those practices are closely connected to military communication.<sup>27</sup>

Another article in the IJSC, with a disciplinary focus on evolutionary psychology, confirms the finding that “military organizations are not the prime concern of strategic communication research”.<sup>28</sup>

Nine of the 56 articles listed in the IJSC are rooted in military science: a) *Becoming a “Normal” and “Ordinary” Organization through Strategic Communication? Discursive Legitimation of the Swedish Armed Forces*;<sup>29</sup> b) *Military Perspective on Strategic Communications as the “New Kid on the Block”: Narrating the Czech Military Deployment in Afghanistan and the Baltic States*;<sup>30</sup> c) *Is IS Online Chatter Just Noise?: An Analysis of the Islamic State Strategic Communications*;<sup>31</sup> d) *A Lack of Effect Studies and of Effects: The Use of Strategic Communication in the Military Domain*;<sup>32</sup> e) *Country Image Repair Strategies During an Asymmetrical Conflict: An Analysis of the Gaza Conflict in 2014*;<sup>33</sup> f) *A Terrorist Group’s Strategic Communication – The Case of the Red Army Faction*;<sup>34</sup> g) *Strategic Communication of Israel’s Intelligence Services: Countering New Challenges with Old Methods*;<sup>35</sup> h) *Propaganda’s Place in Strategic Communication: The*

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<sup>24</sup> HALLAHAN et al. 2007: 8.

<sup>25</sup> HALLAHAN et al. 2007: 27.

<sup>26</sup> ZERFASS et al. 2018: 489.

<sup>27</sup> ZERFASS et al. 2018: 489–490.

<sup>28</sup> SEIFFERT-BROCKMANN 2018: 425.

<sup>29</sup> ÅGREN–SATAOEN 2022: 50–69.

<sup>30</sup> VYKLIČKÝ–DIVIŠOVÁ 2021: 231–252.

<sup>31</sup> ROYO-VELA–MCPBEE 2020: 179–202.

<sup>32</sup> WALLENIUS–NILSSON 2019: 404–417.

<sup>33</sup> TABAK–AVRAHAM 2018: 237–251.

<sup>34</sup> ROTHENBERGER 2017: 286–305.

<sup>35</sup> MAGEN 2017: 269–285.

Case of ISIL's Dabiq Magazine;<sup>36</sup> i) "My God is Not Your God": Applying Relationship Management Theory to Managing Ethnoreligious Crises in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>37</sup>

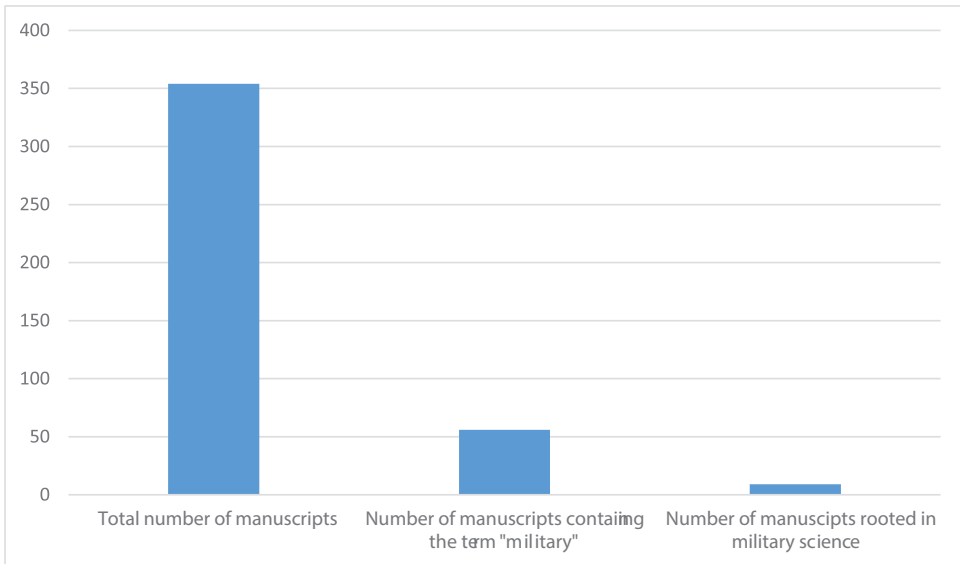


Figure 1: Content analysis of the IJSC (2007–2022)

Source: Compiled by the author.

### **Content analysis of the Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication**

Nine of the 10 publications listed in the RHSC do not have their disciplinary focus anchored in military science. However, one among these publications<sup>38</sup> references research objects in the military domain, namely case studies conducted with two U.S. military units to analyse different aspects of the institutionalisation of public relations in entities which practice strategic communication.

One publication was found in the RHSC with a clear foundation in military science: (Re-)Reading Clausewitz: The Strategy Discourse and its Implications for Strategic Communication.<sup>39</sup> This is a theoretical work, which intends to fill a gap in strategic communication scholarship when it comes to the study of classics of military science. It deconstructs the meaning of *strategy* in the Clausewitzian sense, with a view to “clarifying the concept of *strategic* in strategic communication”.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> WILBUR 2017: 209–223.

<sup>37</sup> PRATT – AZUKA OMENUGHA 2014: 100–125.

<sup>38</sup> WAKEFIELD et al. 2015: 353–369.

<sup>39</sup> NOTHHAFT–SCHÖLZEL 2015.

<sup>40</sup> NOTHHAFT–SCHÖLZEL 2015: 19.

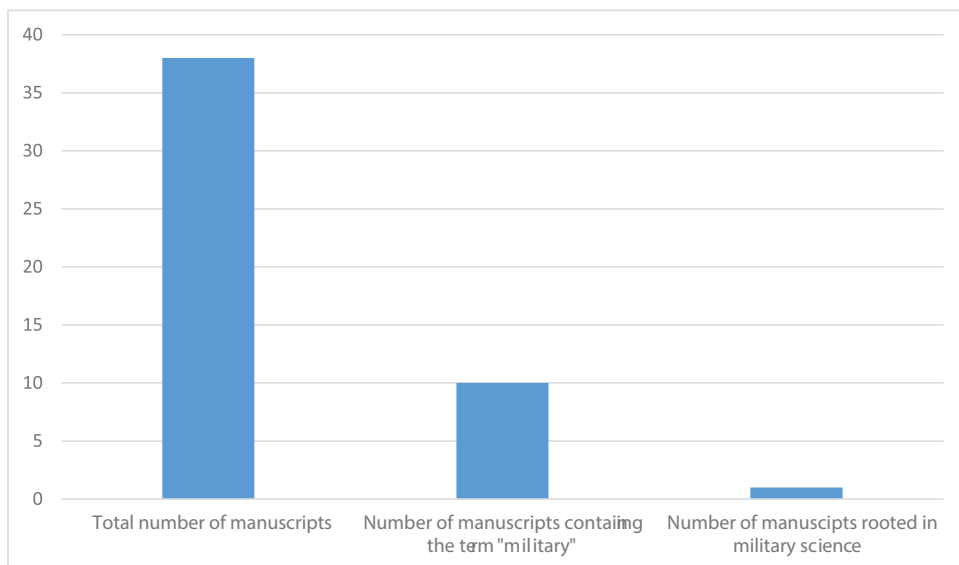


Figure 2: Content analysis of the RHSC

Source: Compiled by the author.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the content analysis conducted by the author reveals a low degree of integration of military science into strategic communication research. Most of the publications which actually focus on military disciplines address research objects on the frontiers of military science, namely military crisis management, (counter)terrorism and intelligence. There are three publications which concentrate on more mainstream military disciplines: strategic studies, psychological operations and military public affairs respectively. Further, the review exposed a tilt towards empirical studies: 6 empirical studies against 1 conceptual work and 3 hybrid works of a partly empirical and partly conceptual nature.

## Strategic communication in armed conflicts over the past decades

On the basis of the assumptions and definitions introduced in the previous sections, instances of strategic communication as part of military practice are observable from the age of antiquity<sup>41</sup> through the present days.

<sup>41</sup> NÉMETH 2021a: 36–67.

Against this background, the author proposes the hypothesis that the beginning of the 1990s represents a turning point, whereupon strategic communication has become increasingly central to armed conflicts and military efforts.

The diversifying nature of armed conflict in the past decades has been described through various concepts, such as small wars, asymmetric warfare, counterinsurgency operations, fourth generation warfare,<sup>42</sup> Revolution in Military Affairs, network-centric warfare, effects-based operations<sup>43</sup> and hybrid warfare. As local conflicts and peace operations multiplied worldwide, the concept of civil–military relations has been institutionalised in military organisations.<sup>44</sup> A connecting tissue across these concepts is the prominent role attributed to communication strategies.<sup>45</sup>

The following sub-sections will discuss in more detail certain examples from the post-1990 period for strategic communication in the context of armed conflicts, and will provide possible explanations for the trends and drivers that determined strategic communication in these settings.

### ***The Gulf War of 1990–1991***

The Gulf War took place at a confluence of technological breakthroughs in warfighting capacities and in global communication. “The novel employment of precision guided munitions and the technical capability to cover combat real-time via the media had previously not been possible in war. This was the first conflict extensively covered “live”.”<sup>46</sup> Real-time and globally accessible media coverage of armed conflict created an unprecedented format of meaning construction across the news media, public opinion, political decision-making and military decision-making. News media assumed an instantaneous influence over the formulation of decisions in warfighting, and military commanders had to engage directly with public opinion.<sup>47</sup> The oft-cited term *CNN effect* encapsulates “the idea that real-time communications technology could provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events”.<sup>48</sup> A visible example of the intertwining of media and military decision-making during the conflict was the emergence of the U.S. General Norman Schwarzkopf, the commander of the coalition forces, as a media celebrity.<sup>49</sup>

It is further argued that the U.S.-led coalition exploited to its strategic advantage the new media landscape through conducting an “unprecedented media management campaign [...] to win the war on the home front”.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the coalition’s overwhelming

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<sup>42</sup> NÉMETH 2013: 131.

<sup>43</sup> McMASTER 2008: 19–20 cited in NÉMETH 2021b: 129.

<sup>44</sup> NÉMETH 2021a: 67.

<sup>45</sup> NÉMETH 2020: 13.

<sup>46</sup> ADAMSON 1997: 4.

<sup>47</sup> ADAMSON 1997: 2.

<sup>48</sup> ROBINSON 1999: 301.

<sup>49</sup> NÉMETH 2021a: 66.

<sup>50</sup> MALLEY 1997: 280.



superiority in psychological operations capacity was seen as a crucial success factor on the battlefield.<sup>51</sup>

### ***The Global War on Terror: Iraq and Afghanistan***

Following the 9/11 terror attacks, U.S. President Bush has embarked upon a Global War on Terror (GWOT), which came to entail two large-scale armed conflicts in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The GWOT has influenced the development of military theory and practice, including the role of strategic communication in the military domain.<sup>52</sup> The unfolding of the GWOT coincided with the emergence of the interrelated trends of the “digital revolution, new message contributors and one-to-one message platforms”.<sup>53</sup> These trends had a determinant impact on the strategic communication efforts of all stakeholders in the context of GWOT.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent war lends itself to important conclusions from a strategic communication point of view. It is argued that once the invasion has ended, and President Bush declared mission accomplished, the U.S. political and military leadership has lost its hegemony in dominating news and managing public opinion about the conflict.<sup>54</sup>

Continuing combat action received more minutes of network television coverage [in the U.S. – comment by the author] in 2004 than the invasion and subsequent fighting did in 2003, helping to explain why casualties were such a constant presence in news stories throughout the period. Moreover, the combination of suicide terrorism and the Abu Ghraib scandal received almost as much attention as Iraqi reconstruction in 2004 (Tyndall Report Archive).<sup>55</sup>

From this perspective, bombings committed by the insurgents in Iraq should not only be seen as combat actions, but also as the purposeful and strategic use of communication to further the overall goals of these organisation. The increasing availability and affordability of mobile devices and Internet connection enabled the insurgents with a strategic capacity to mediate their actions and messages to, and create meaning with, key audiences: sponsors, supporters and potential recruits, enemies, adversaries, domestic and foreign publics. In the same manner, insurgents deliberately engaged with foreign journalists and media outlets to pursue their strategic goals.<sup>56</sup>

Contrary to the 1990–1991 war in Iraq, the U.S.-led coalition lost the strategic communication initiative, and the insurgents’ communication efforts proved more effective in advancing their strategic goals than those of the Western militaries deployed to Iraq. This strategic communication superiority on the side of the insurgents has explanatory

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<sup>51</sup> MALLEY 1997: 280–297.

<sup>52</sup> NÉMETH 2013: 129–130.

<sup>53</sup> O’CONNOR–SHUMATE 2018: 401.

<sup>54</sup> PATRICK–THRALL 2007: 95–96.

<sup>55</sup> PATRICK–THRALL 2007: 108–109.

<sup>56</sup> GARFIELD 2007: 22–32.

power with regard to the “dramatic and resounding drop in public support coverage [in the U.S. – comment by the author] for Bush’s handling of the war in Iraq”,<sup>57</sup> falling from a high point of 76% to less than 50% by the fall of 2003 eventually sinking as low as 35% by 2005.<sup>58</sup>

As the GWOT continued, with major armed conflicts persisting in Afghanistan and Iraq, militant groups and terrorist organisations engaged in the conflicts developed strategic communication activities of increasing scope and sophistication. In 2005, al-Qaeda Deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: “We are in a battle, and [...] more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media.”<sup>59</sup>

The self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) waged a strategic communication campaign of “unparalleled scope and complexity”.<sup>60</sup> Strategic communication went to the very essence of the ISIS phenomenon, not only in terms of advancing its strategic goals on the ground, but also in helping to project the threat posed by ISIS beyond the region,<sup>61</sup> through inspiring terrorist attacks abroad, spreading terrorist propaganda and attracting foreign terrorist fighters and financing. Research has pointed out the integration between ISIS strategic communication and kinetic operations. “The positive relationship between the IS territorial control and the quality of its media production reflect a shift in the IS operations. As the IS experiences territorial expansion and military success, the organization dedicates more resources from warfighting to governance and strategic communication warfare.”<sup>62</sup>

As in the case of Iraq, the U.S.- and NATO-led military operations in Afghanistan failed to gain a strategic communication advantage over the adversary. “[T]he Taliban did not prevail just because they lied more or understood Afghans better, but because they applied principles of strategic communications in a manner that was beyond what their more sophisticated adversaries could manage.”<sup>63</sup> In particular, the Taliban has effectively integrated communication activities with military actions and public service provision in furtherance of its strategic goals of toppling the Kabul-based government and expelling foreign forces.<sup>64</sup>

## ***Russian interventions in Ukraine***

Strategic communication – which in the Russian context is often synthesised into concepts such as information warfare, propaganda or psychological operations – infuses Russian military practice and theory. There is broad consensus that, beginning with the early

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<sup>57</sup> PATRICK–THRALL 2007: 96.

<sup>58</sup> PATRICK–THRALL 2007: 113–114.

<sup>59</sup> ROYO-VELA–MCBEE 2020: 182.

<sup>60</sup> WINTER 2020: 38.

<sup>61</sup> ROYO-VELA–MCBEE 2020.

<sup>62</sup> SWEENEY et al. 2020: 481.

<sup>63</sup> JOHNSON 2018: 960.

<sup>64</sup> JOHNSON 2018: 961.

2000s,<sup>65</sup> information operations have become an increasingly important aspect of Russian military practice, intensifying around the war in Georgia in 2008 and culminating around the interventions against Ukraine in 2014 and in 2022. Psychological operations, in particular, are explicitly discussed in the present Russian military doctrine and military theoretical debate.<sup>66</sup>

Russia's disinformation campaign against Ukraine has been characterised by a commander in the U.S. military as "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare".<sup>67</sup> And the annexation of Crimea "could be seen as a turning point in modern successful Russian military operations which exploited information influence and interference, considered the first contemporary Russian use of cyber warfare and information operations alongside conventional military activity".<sup>68</sup> Indeed, in his famous *Gerasimov doctrine* speech of 2013, Russia's Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, expounded on the importance of information operations in the overall mix of military and non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals, where non-military means are becoming dominant.<sup>69</sup>

Russia's interference in Ukraine and its subsequent military operations in Crimea and the Donbass were popularly described as hybrid warfare. As the term became *en vogue*, the emphasis on information warfare emerged as a distinguishing feature in explaining (or reinterpreting) the meaning of hybrid operations.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusions

Synthesising the above examples of strategic communication in the context of armed conflicts in the post-1990 period, it is concluded that strategic communication has become increasingly central to military practice over the past decades. This evolution shows a consistent pattern over time (from the early 1990s to the present day), across various theatres of operation (Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine) and through armed forces of highly different character, complexity and size (regular armed forces, insurgent groups, terrorist organisations).

## Future directions

From a conceptual point of view, one direction of future research could constitute in further analysing military theories/classics of military science to clarify the meaning of key concepts in strategic communication. Another direction of research could concentrate on the relationship between strategic communication and contemporary military concepts

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<sup>65</sup> MÖLDER–SAZONOV 2018: 316.

<sup>66</sup> MATTSSON 2016 cited in WALLENIUS–NILSSON 2019: 404.

<sup>67</sup> VANDIVER 2014 cited in MEJIAS–VOKUEV 2017: 1027–1042.

<sup>68</sup> HAMMOND–ERREY 2019: 12.

<sup>69</sup> PYNNÖNIEMI–JOKELA 2020: 831–832.

<sup>70</sup> WITHER 2016: 76.

which describe the changing nature of armed conflict, such as hybrid warfare, asymmetric warfare and fourth generation warfare.

From an empirical point of view, potential lines of inquiry could include studies into military history to explore the evolution of strategic communication in warfare as well as studies regarding the interplay between strategic communication, kinetic military operations and the attainment of political-military goals in modern warfare.

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