

F
A
K C
E T

Soft Power as a Countermeasure to Hybrid Threats

By Mr Omree Wechsler and

Mr Doron Feldman

Tel Aviv University

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Europe, several state-led disinformation campaigns were launched in NATO's member states with the goal to undermine the public support in the Alliance and deepen the divisions between allied nations. NATO's military components, such as Air capabilities, may be part of a comprehensive strategy to counter the threat.

Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation: NATO's Soft Underbelly?

While not quite a new phenomenon, hybrid warfare has been discussed in international forums since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹ However, since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed a surge in disinformation campaigns and attempts to control and sow false narratives, many of which targeted NATO with the aim of undermining

public support in the Alliance and deepening the divisions between its member states. In March 2020, Lithuanian media outlets reported that their content management systems were hacked and that a false story accusing NATO soldiers of spreading the pandemic in the country appeared on their websites.² In July 2020, security firm FireEye's subsidiary, Mandiant, released a report on a disinformation campaign named Ghostwriter, the aim of which was to undermine NATO and US troops in Poland and the Baltics by leveraging anti-US narratives and themes related to the pandemic.³

According to the Commander of US Cyber Command and Director of the NSA, General Paul Nakasone, the low cost of foreign influence operations, facilitated by easy and high exposure to social media users make them attractive to adversaries to spread discord while operating below the threshold of armed conflict.⁴ Given that hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns have become the 'weapon of choice' for NATO's adversaries, and that the Alliance's cohesion, legitimacy, and public trust are growing more critical in the face of global crises, NATO should turn to alternative approaches in order to improve its resiliency and capability to respond to future crises.

This paper suggests a soft power approach to preserve the Alliance's legitimacy and cohesion and promote further cooperation with member and non-member states.

NATO's Approach to Counter Disinformation

In July 2018, NATO's member states recognized hybrid threats and disinformation as a challenge to the stability of the Euro-Atlantic security environment.⁵ NATO's approach to countering disinformation includes tracking, monitoring and analyzing the information environment relevant to its

missions and tailoring its strategic communications in order to deliver fact-based, timely, transparent, and coordinated information. In order to do so, NATO has intensified its digital communications on the pandemic response across all platforms, turned public diplomacy events into online engagements and enhanced the dissemination of communications in the Russian language. NATO has also increased the support for think tanks, fact-checking organizations and other civil society initiatives in order to promote debate and build resilience.⁶

However, research has shown that disinformation spreads faster and has a greater reach than verified facts⁷ and spreads even faster during crises, such as pandemics.⁸ These conclusions may render NATO's approach less effective due to the strategic time gap between the spread of disinformation and the response to it.

A suggested long-term solution, which could help the Alliance to utilize its military components in order to maintain its image, attraction and public support, is a comprehensive soft power strategy.

A Soft Power Strategy: NATO's Missing Component?

Soft power describes a country's ability to persuade others to change their behaviour without force or coercion. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political values, and policies.⁹ Exercising soft power domestically can increase resilience, social cohesion, solidarity, trust, legitimacy, and the central government's attractiveness.¹⁰ Over time, the concept of soft power has come to apply to various actors in world politics, including Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs).¹¹

Over the years, utilizing military components in order to project soft power was termed 'military diplomacy'. Military diplomacy refers to the pursuit

of foreign policy objectives through the peaceful employment of defence resources and capabilities, such as disaster relief and medical and humanitarian aid operations.¹² In this sense, a swift and timely response to global or regional crises could contribute to NATO's soft power strategy. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, NATO has conducted numerous airlifts of medical supplies, built dozens of field hospitals and provided thousands of beds and logistic assistance to international organizations through the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC).¹³

However, as a military organization, NATO's ability to respond to medical emergencies is limited and response is largely dependent on its member states' initiatives. Limiting NATO's role in responding to a non-military crisis has led to a delayed response based on differing perceptions of the threat among its member states, which China and Russia have exploited for propaganda purposes.¹⁴

Strategically, NATO should strive to use its logistical apparatus, command and control structures, and its connections on both sides of the Atlantic in order to increase and maintain its readiness and responsiveness to future civilian emergencies. This will showcase increasing relevance, effectiveness, and the ability to adapt to changing strategic circumstances, all of which are crucial for the establishment of a soft power strategy.

NATO's Air Power Capabilities: Current Initiatives and the Risks for the Future

A major component of a soft power strategy, which builds upon NATO's ability to respond in a timely and coordinated manner to civilian crises such as pandemics, relies heavily on leveraging NATO's Air Power, and more specifically, its airlift capabilities. NATO's strategic airlift capabilities rely on several Alliance-supported initiatives such as the Strategic Airlift

International Solution (SALIS) that enables participating allies to charter commercial transport aircraft, and the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), through which participating allies jointly own and operate C-17 Globemaster III heavy cargo aircraft.¹⁵ Two other initiatives expected to significantly increase European airlift capabilities are the European Air Transport Command's (EATC) program for its seven-member nations to jointly purchase and operate Airbus A400M aircraft, and the developing Multi-national Multi-role Tanker-Transport Unit (MMU) comprised of eight Airbus A-330 aircraft collectively purchased and operated by six NATO nations.¹⁶

However, these initiatives seem to be scattered and are not under control of NATO. Furthermore, these initiatives face risks that derive from changes in the strategic environment such as sudden security emergencies, further deployment to other theatres etc.

Moreover, NATO's airlift capabilities still rely heavily on US strategic airlift while other member states suffer a severe gap in requirements and capacity.¹⁷ Despite earlier expectations that the A400M fleet initiative would mitigate gaps in European airlift capability, the program has been facing technical and cost challenges and delays.¹⁸ Due to the delays, European member states will have to continue their reliance on the SALIS initiative, designed as an interim solution, until agreement on a long-term procurement solution.¹⁹

Furthermore, these gaps may worsen due to the changing strategic environment. During the first months of the pandemic outbreak, these initiatives have been vital to the prompt delivery of humanitarian and medical aid.²⁰ However, given the current state, a combination of scenarios could potentially strain and wear NATO's existing airlift capabilities. These scenarios include a resurgence of the COVID-19 crisis due to the emergence of new, potentially deadlier and vaccine-resistant variants of the virus, along with provocations along the Alliance's Eastern Flank, and predicted

overall cuts to defence spending.²¹ To maintain its ability to fulfil its missions amidst heightened crisis scenarios, NATO will have to expand its access to strategic airlift capabilities.

Expanding NATO's Airlift Capabilities: A Suggested Solution

While acquiring airlift capabilities seems like an obvious solution, purchasing transport aircraft is a long and expensive process. Therefore, a suggested solution for increased access to airlift capabilities during crisis should focus on collective contracting. However, unlike SALIS, which since 2018 relies on Antonov Logistics Salis as a single provider, a new solution should involve contracting several commercial airlines through member states' militaries in order to allow rapid and flexible access to airlift for different requirements and changing scenarios. Such a solution already exists as part of the US Civil Reserve Air Fleet, through which US airlines voluntarily commit, by contract, to support US Department of Defense airlift requirements in times of emergencies. While ideas to establish a NATO equivalent in Europe began in the 1970s, only a few European member states supported the idea.²² However, with NATO's member states almost doubled since the 1970s, along with new partner states and with a clearer understanding of NATO's potential contribution in times of a civilian or a medical emergency, this idea is due for a revisit and reconsideration. However, difficulties to deploy airlift capabilities for certain contingencies are likely to remain. This is due to the veto right given to each member state. To address this difficulty, NATO should discuss pandemics and natural disasters under the Article 3 resiliency criteria. Article 3 directs member states to develop and maintain their capacity to resist major shocks, such as armed attacks or natural disasters, by means of self-help and mutual aid. One of the article's basic requirements is resilient transport systems to ensure the rapid movement of NATO's forces across the Alliance territory.²³ Enlarging the Alliance's access to flexible airlift solutions would strengthen

its ability to deliver humanitarian aid and offer disaster relief as part of projecting its soft power, thus allowing it to mitigate threats to its cohesion, solidarity and public support.

Mr Omree Wechsler is a senior researcher for cybersecurity policies and strategy at the Yuval Ne'eman Workshop for Science, Technology and Security in Tel Aviv University. His research fields include information operations, elections cybersecurity, national cyber strategies, cyber threats on space systems and cyber weapons proliferation.

Mr Doron Feldman is a PhD. candidate in the Doctoral Students Program in The School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs at Tel-Aviv University. His research focuses on the national security strategies of small nations that live in a conflict environment and their soft power implementation.

Endnotes

1. Marović, J., 'Wars of Ideas: Hybrid Warfare, Political Interference, and Disinformation,' in 'New Perspectives on Shared Security: NATO's Next 70 years.' Carnegie Europe, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/28/wars-of-ideas-hybrid-warfare-political-interference-and-disinformation-pub-80419#tableContents>, Nov. 2019 (accessed 12 Jan. 2021).
2. Tucker, P., 'Russia pushing Coronavirus lies as part of anti-NATO influence ops in Europe,' DefenseOne, <https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2020/03/russia-pushing-coronavirus-lies-part-anti-nato-influence-ops-europe/164140/>, 26 Mar. 2020, (accessed 13 Jan. 2021).
3. Mandiant, 'Ghostwriter' Influence Campaign,' <https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/blog/pdfs/Ghostwriter-Influence-Campaign.pdf>, Jul. 2020 (accessed 13 Jan. 2021).
4. Vavra. S., 'NSA director ranks influence operations as a top concern,' CyberScoop, <https://www.cyberscoop.com/nsa-director-nakasone-influence-operations/>, 16 Sep. 2020 (accessed 13 Jan. 2021).
5. NATO, Brussels Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participation in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11–12 Jul. 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm (accessed 13 Jan. 2021).

Increasing NATO's Resilience

6. NATO, NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>, 17 Jul. 2020 (accessed 13 Jan. 2021).
7. Dizikes, P., 'Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories,' MIT News, available at: <https://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>, 8 Mar. 2018 (accessed 15 Jan. 2021).
8. Depoux, A., Martin, S., Karafillakis, E., Preet, R., Wilder-Smith, A., & H.J. Larson, 'The pandemic of social media panic travels faster than the COVID-19 outbreak,' *Journal of Travel Medicine*, vol. 27, no. 3 (Apr. 2020), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taaa031> (accessed 13 Feb. 2021).
9. Nye, J. S., 'Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,' New York: Public Affairs, 2004.
10. Wang, L., & Y. C. Lu, 'The Conception of Soft Power and Its Policy Implications: a Comparative Study of China and Taiwan,' *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 17, no. 56 (2008): p. 425–447.
11. Smith, K. E., 'Is the European Union's Soft Power in Decline?,' *Current History*, vol. 113, no. 761 (2014): p. 104–109.
12. Pajitinka, E., 'Military Diplomacy and its Present Functions,' *Security Dimensions. International and National Studies*, no. 20, 2016, p. 179.
13. NATO, NATO's response to the COVID-19 pandemic factsheet, available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/11/pdf/2011-factsheet-COVID-19_en.pdf, Nov. 2020 (accessed 20 Jan. 2021).
14. De Maio, G., 'NATO's response to COVID-19: Lessons for resilience and readiness,' *Brookings*, Oct. 2020, p. 3, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/FP_20201028_nato_covid_demaio-1.pdf (accessed 20 Jan 2021); Brzozowski, A. 'NATO tells top commander to speed up medical aid in response to pandemic,' *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/nato-tasks-top-commander-to-speed-up-medical-aid-in-response-to-covid-19-pandemic/>, 3 Apr. 2020 (accessed 20 Jan. 2021).
15. NATO, Strategic Airlift, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50107.htm, 13 Oct. 2020 (accessed 24 Jan. 2021).
16. NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA), 14 May 2020, available at: <https://www.defense-aerospace.com/articles-view/release/3/211246/european-mmf-tanker-pool-to-receive-first-two-aircraft-in-june.html#:~:text=The%20Multinational%20Multirole%20Tanker%20Transport%20Unit%20%28MMU%29%20The,Forward%20Operating%20Base%20%2B%20%28FOB%2B%29%20in%20Cologne-Wahn%20%28Germany%29> (accessed 29 Mar. 2021).
17. Hages, L., 'Europe's strategic airlift gap: Quantifying the capability gap and measuring solutions,' *JAPCC Journal* 19 (2014): pp. 21–25; Efstathiou, Y., 'European Strategic Airlift: a Work In Progress,' *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, available at: <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2019/01/european-strategic-airlift#>, 10 Jan. 2019 (accessed 22 Jan. 2021).
18. Pfeifer, S., 'Airbus agrees revised deal for troubled A400M programme,' *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/ed8682bc-8ea0-11e9-a24d-b42f641eca37>, 14 Jun. 2019 (accessed 24 Jan. 2021); Meyer, D. 'Airbus's A400M was meant to be the pride of Europe's military. But after years of problems it still has a screw loose,' *Fortune*, <https://fortune.com/2019/11/14/airbus-a400m-loose-screw-germany-luftwaffe/>, 14 Nov. 2019 (accessed 24 Jan. 2021).
19. *Ibid.* 15.
20. *Ibid.* 14., p. 5.
21. Morcos, P., 'Toward a New "Lost Decade"? COVID-19 and Defense Spending in Europe,' *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Oct. 2020, p. 2, available at: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201015_Morcos_Toward_Lost_Decade.pdf (accessed 24 Jan. 2021).
22. Crackel, T. J., 'A History of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet,' *US Air Force History & Museums Program* [website], 1998, p. 178, available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2013/Sep/16/2001329866/-1/-1/0/AFD-130916-006.pdf> (accessed 24 Jan. 2021).
23. NATO, Resilience and Article 3, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm, 16 Nov. 2020 (accessed 5 Mar. 2021).

