Cognitive Warfare: the Fallen in Afghanistan to Attack Institutional Roles. The War that Passes Through Words (and Mainly Hits Politics).

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Cognitive warfare is neither an abstract theory nor a conference fad: it is the norm in our information ecosystem. It is "war" because it targets the most sensitive area, perception, using seemingly harmless means: phrases, images, insinuations, half-truths, selective indignations. We have extensively discussed it in this article.

In politics, it works better than elsewhere, because politics thrives on consensus and consensus thrives on narratives.

The crucial point is this: those holding institutional roles have the duty to maintain stable international relations, even when an ally says or does something that irritates public opinion. And that very duty becomes a perfect vulnerability: the internal opponent can turn it into

“subservience,” “betrayal,” “lack of patriotism.” It is a powerful mechanism because it forces the institution into a tight corner: if it responds, it risks a diplomatic incident; if it remains silent, it seems complicit.

The Trump–NATO Case: a Phrase that Becomes a Political Bomb

At this time, it is clearly visible in the statements of President Donald Trump. On one hand, the attack on NATO allies and Afghanistan, in an interview where he claimed that the partners “have been a bit behind, a bit away from the front line.”
On the other hand, the statement that the United States “never asked for anything” from other NATO countries (also connected, in that passage, to pressure on Greenland and relations with Denmark).

It is not just controversy: it is a frame. The frame is “we paid, others took advantage.” It is simple, emotional, memorable. And it is perfect for triggering chain reactions because it touches raw nerves: national pride, mourning, military honor.

The Italy Effect: Diplomacy as Achilles' Heel, Opposition as Amplifier

Here the internal “cognitive warfare” level comes into play. The Opposition attacked Giorgia Meloni, asking her to distance herself from Trump's words and accusing her of “subservience,” recalling the fallen and the missions (Afghanistan, Iraq/Nassiriya, Balkans, Lebanon, Africa).

In substance, the reference to the price paid by Italy is not propaganda: Italy had 54 fallen in Afghanistan, a fact also remembered in the past by institutional and press sources.
But the point of *cognitive warfare* is **how** that fact is staged in the political conflict: the sacrifice becomes a lever to force a binary choice (“either you stand with the honor of our military or you stand with Trump”). The complexity of international relations — which requires time, channels, languages — is compressed into an immediate moral judgment.

And here the trap closes: those in power must hold their ground with a strategic ally; those attacking can present themselves as the sole defender of national dignity, knowing that the

counterpart cannot “raise the tone” without external costs.

The UK Effect: When Even Harry and Starmer Respond

The same dynamic is replicated in London. Prime Minister Keir Starmer called Trump's words “insulting” and “appalling,” recalling the British blood tribute (457 military killed).
And, a rare occurrence, Prince Harry also intervened with a very harsh statement: he recalled that in 2001 NATO invoked Article 5 (first and only time) and that from there arose the political-military obligation to support the USA in Afghanistan; then he brought back the human dimension (“I lost friends,” “the UK had 457 dead”).

Here *cognitive warfare* shows another face: when the initial message is abrasive enough, it **forces** normally cautious public figures (a head of government, a member of the royal family) to expose themselves. This too is a result: shifting the agenda, polarizing, obtaining “front-page” statements that fuel a new emotional cycle.

Why It Is Cognitive Warfare (and Why “It Is Everywhere”)

This story contains almost all the typical ingredients:

- **Identity Simplification**: “we true fighters” vs “opportunistic allies.”
- **High-Intensity Emotional Hook**: fallen, mourning, military honor.
- **Amplification for Internal Conflict**: the domestic opponent uses the international incident as a political club (the Renzi–Meloni case).
- **Dilemma for Those in Power**: every response has a cost (external or internal).
- **Selective Memory**: a phrase is isolated and transformed into an overall judgment on twenty years of missions and alliances.

The Antidote: Bringing Back Context, Removing the Fallen from Propaganda

If *cognitive warfare* thrives on emotional shortcuts, the defense is boring but effective:

1. **Context and Facts**: remember that NATO invoked Article 5 after September 11 and that many countries paid a very high price.

2. **Separate Mourning from Contention**: the honor of the fallen cannot become daily ammunition (neither to absolve nor to strike).
3. **Dual Institutional Track**: public firmness on values (respect for the military) and diplomatic management in appropriate channels, without theatricalizing every friction.
4. **Political Responsibility**: the opposition controls and criticizes; but when it turns diplomacy into automatic “betrayal,” it feeds the mechanism it claims to fight.

Cognitive warfare is everywhere because there is attention to be captured everywhere. But in politics, it is more dangerous: because it does not just make us argue on social media — it can bend real decisions, real alliances, and even the way we remember those who are no longer with us.

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