Lessons Learned on Cognitive Warfare

Published on 25/03/2026

Cognitive warfare today represents one of the most significant dimensions of contemporary strategic confrontation. It is not just about the dissemination of information or propaganda in the traditional sense, but aims to directly influence **perceptions**, **beliefs**, **emotions**, and **decision-making processes** of individuals, social groups, and **political** and **military** leaderships.

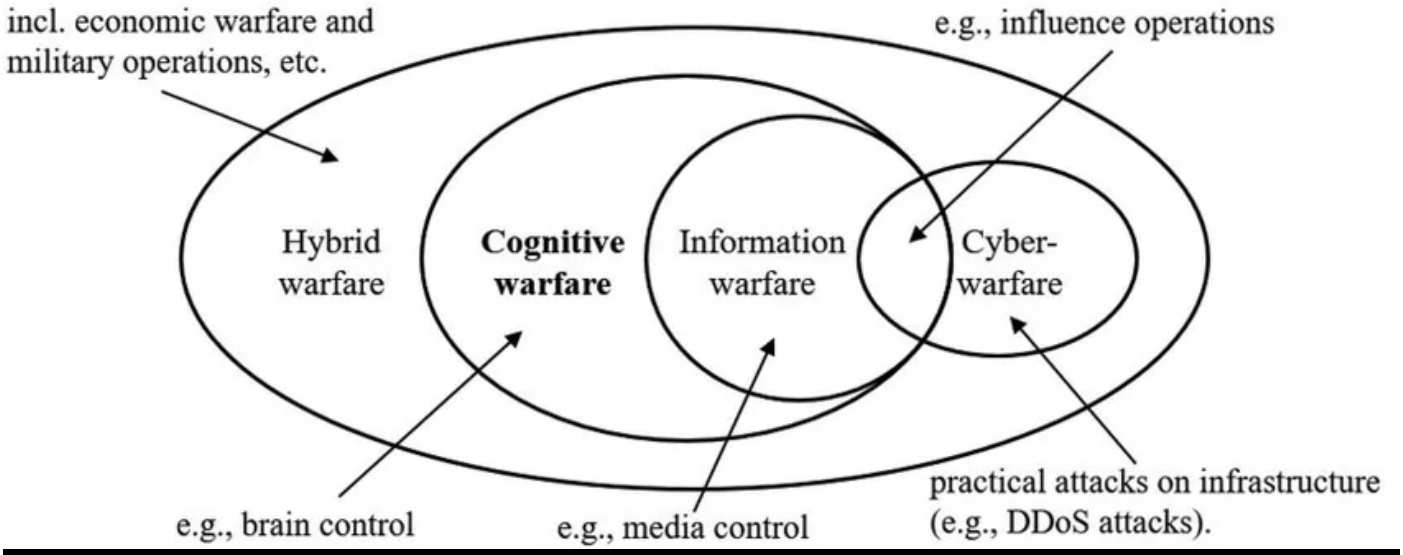
In this context, **communication** is no longer an accessory element of **political or military** action, but a structural component of competition. Every **political or military activity**, to be effective, must include planning that encompasses not only **operational objectives** and **tools of employment**, but also a clear **communication architecture**, based on **threat analysis** and **context analysis**.

Communication as a decisive factor in political or military activities

One of the main **lessons learned** in modern competition scenarios is that the success or failure of a **political or military activity** also depends on the ability to plan and conduct an adequate **communication plan**.

When such a plan is lacking, or conceived in a residual manner, the actor exposes themselves to various **vulnerabilities**: loss of control over the **narrative**, inability to anticipate **adversary communication lines**, difficulty in maintaining **internal and external consensus**, exposure to **delegitimization** and **manipulation** campaigns.

An effective communication plan should contain at least two essential dimensions: **threat analysis** and **context analysis**.



Lessons Learned on Cognitive Warfare

Threat analysis: anticipating adversary communication lines

In the **cognitive domain**, threat analysis cannot be limited to **kinetic** or **technological** aspects. It must also include possible actions and activities of **adversary communication lines**.

This means identifying in advance:

- the **hostile narratives** that could be activated;
- the **divisive themes** that the adversary might exploit;
- the most suitable **informative channels** for message dissemination;

- the **amplifying subjects**, formal or informal, capable of multiplying its impact;
- the techniques of **disinformation**, **emotional manipulation**, and **context distortion**.

Without this analysis, every **political or military activity** risks being accompanied by the adversary's narrative superiority, which can shape the **perception of events** even before the facts are understood in their reality.

Cognitive warfare, in fact, does not act only on the information level, but on how information is **interpreted**. For this reason, anticipating adversary communication moves becomes an integral part of **strategic planning**.

Context analysis: understanding the informational environment

The second pillar is **context analysis**, that is, the **informational environment** in which the **political or military action** develops.

Every message operates within an **ecosystem** composed of **cultural**, **social**, **media**, **technological**, and **psychological** factors. Not knowing this environment means not understanding how a message will be **received**, **distorted**, **amplified**, or **rejected**.

Context analysis should therefore include:

- the **political and social framework** of reference;
- the level of **trust in institutions**;
- the sensitivity of **public opinion** regarding certain topics;
- the role of **traditional media** and **digital platforms**;
- the presence of **social or identity fractures** exploitable by hostile actors;
- the speed and direction of **information circulation**.

In a **saturated**, **interconnected**, and **polarized** environment, it is not enough to communicate: it is necessary to understand **where** you communicate, **to whom**, with what **codes**, and against what forms of **interference**.

The asymmetric battlefield where no shots are fired: how a hoax becomes “truth” by inertia

The weight of the international scenario

Every **political or military activity** also takes place within an **international scenario** that influences **languages**, **perceptions**, and **expectations**.

Even when the action is localized, the **global context** exerts a direct influence on the **cognitive environment**. Communication models that have emerged in major powers or international crises tend to spread, becoming implicit references even in other theaters.

As observed in international public and journalistic debate, the attitude of international actors has had a significant impact on the **global communication scenario**, contributing to strengthening styles based on **polarization**, **extreme simplification**, **delegitimization of traditional sources**, and strong **emotionalization of public discourse**. This type of approach has generally affected the **international informational climate**, making the boundary between **political communication**, **strategic narrative**, and **perceptual manipulation** more fragile.

Therefore, the analysis of the environment cannot be only **local** or **national**: it must also include the drag effect generated by **international dynamics**.

Cognitive warfare and strategic vulnerability

The main **vulnerability** in contemporary **political or military activities** arises from the fact that communication is often still considered as a support to action, while it is part of the action itself.

Cognitive warfare exploits this underestimation. It strikes **beliefs**, fuels **doubts**, alters the perception of **legitimacy**, fragments **consensus**, exacerbates **oppositions**, and produces **decision paralysis**.

It is not necessary for the adversary to impose a complete lie. It is sufficient that they manage to:

- **decontextualize** real facts;
- select **partial** elements;
- amplify **emotionally sensitive** content;
- instill **distrust**;
- occupy the **cognitive space** more quickly.

In this sense, every **political or military activity** can be compromised not only by **operational** errors, but by insufficient preparation of the **informational and cognitive domain**.

Lessons learned

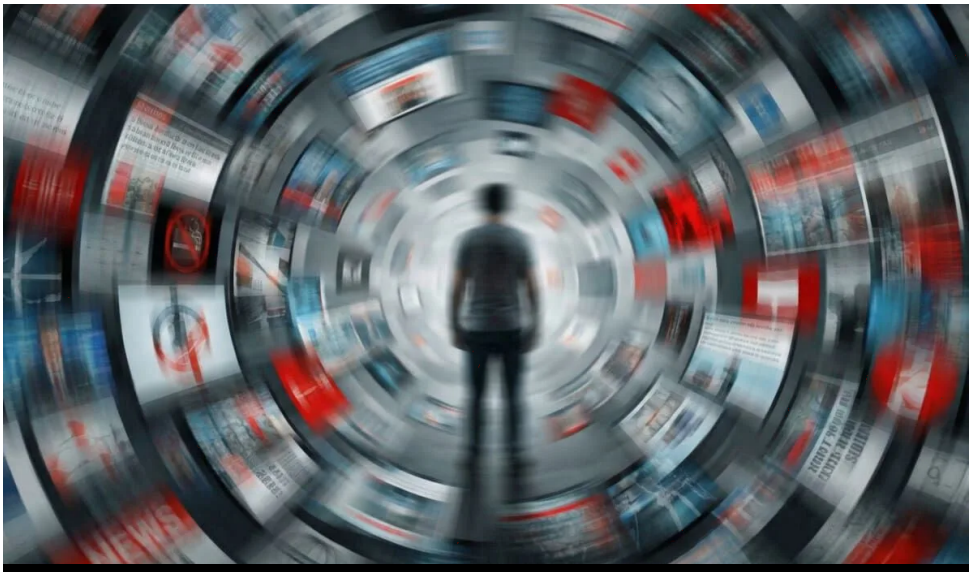
From observing contemporary scenarios, some **fundamental lessons** emerge.

The first is that **communication** must be planned from the beginning as an **integrated strategic function**, and not as a subsequent or merely reactive activity.

The second is that every plan must contain a clear **threat analysis**, aimed at understanding how the adversary might act on the level of **narratives**, **disinformation**, and **psychological pressure**.

The third is that **context analysis** is as decisive as knowing the adversary, because every message lives within an environment that conditions its **effects**, **limits**, and possible **distortions**.

The fourth is that the **international context** increasingly influences local dynamics, requiring a **broad**, **multilevel**, and **continuous** reading of the communication environment.



Lessons Learned on Cognitive Warfare

Conclusions

The most important lesson is that, in contemporary **political or military activities**, it is not enough to prepare **means**, **procedures**, and **operational capabilities**. It is also necessary to plan the **cognitive domain**.

An adequate **communication plan** must contain both **threat analysis**, that is, possible actions and activities of **adversary communication lines**, and **context analysis**, understood as a deep understanding of the **informational**, **political**, and **social environment** in which the action develops.

Only in this way is it possible to reduce **vulnerability**, maintain **narrative initiative**, and prevent the adversary from turning **communication advantage** into **strategic advantage**.