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Operational Art and Cognitive Warfare

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***Abstract*— The report examines the transformation of operational art under the influence of cognitive warfare. The main focus is on the strategic asymmetry between the leading global military doctrines. Through a systematic analysis, differences in approaches are revealed – NATO's reactive-defensive model aimed at societal resilience; the US's proactive model striving for cognitive dominance; Russia's offensive reflexive management and China's intelligentized warfare. The results of the study prove that the cognitive dimension is becoming a critical factor for success in multi-domain operations, where victory is defined by breaking the enemy's will and paralyzing his decision-making processes. Guidelines are proposed for integrating cognitive effects into operational design and developing new metrics for effectiveness.**

Keywords*— *cognitive warfare, operational art, cognitive superiority, doctrinal asymmetry.

I. Introduction

The nature of war is undergoing a transformation. Conflicts are no longer confined to the traditional domains of land, air, and sea, but are being transferred to the intangible spaces of information and human consciousness. In this new reality, the human mind becomes the primary battlefield – both target and weapon. This change questions and reshapes the very foundations of military thought, elevating cognitive warfare from a tactical tool to a strategic force transforming operational art.

Given the topicality and discursive nature of the problem posed for consideration, the main goal of the publication is to explore the integration of cognitive warfare into contemporary operational art, analyzing the strategic asymmetry between Western (NATO and the USA) and Eastern (Russia and China) military doctrines. In the context of the research objective, the evolution from psychological operations to neurologically based influence is traced and the research question is sought to answer how differences in national philosophies – from building democratic resilience to offensive reflexive governance and intelligentized warfare – determine the dynamics of contemporary geopolitical competition. Through the conducted analysis and synthesis, the aim is to define how the cognitive dimension is reformulating the processes of operational planning, decision-making and achieving strategic superiority in the era of digital hyper-connectivity and artificial intelligence.

II. Materials and Methods

To achieve the research objectives, official military doctrines and conceptual documents were analyzed. Publications of leading researchers in the field of cognitive warfare such as Backes & Swab, Miller, Claverie & du Cluzel and others were used. Data from specialized centers of excellence (NATO ACT, StratCom CoE) and studies of Eastern military models were included.

For the needs of the publication, a systematic analysis was applied to reveal the transformation of operational art under the influence of cognitive factors and to define cognitive warfare as a multi-layered phenomenon. A comparative analysis was used to identify the strategic asymmetry between Western and Eastern military doctrines. A new definition of cognitive warfare was derived through the synthesis method, integrating technological, informational and psychological aspects. Conceptual modeling was used in examining the processes of operational planning and operational design, in order to identify non-physical centers of gravity and new metrics for effectiveness.

III. Results and Discussion

A. Defining cognitive warfare

Central to cognitive warfare theory is the concept of the human mind as a contested territory or battlefield. This reframes conflict from a physical contest to one in which perception and decision-making are the primary objectives. In defining cognitive warfare, the authors agree on the idea that it is not simply a technological process, but one that aims to change the human condition. The publications of Backes and Swab [1], Hung and Hung [2] and NATO ACT [3] emphasize that the goal is not only to change thinking,

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but to lead to a specific action or inaction that serves the interests of the attacker. In addition, both the analysis of Miller [4] and the NATO ACT document recognize that, unlike cyberwarfare, which attacks software, or kinetic warfare, which attacks physical objects, cognitive warfare targets mental states, decision-making and perceptions. Tashev [5] and Hung and Hung recognize that cognitive warfare is related to information, but goes further – it is not about the transfer of data, but about the effect that this data causes in the brain, i.e. achieving the cognitive effect. A wide range of means is used to achieve this – from technology and media to social environment and legal norms.

The differences in definitions stem mainly from where the authors position cognitive warfare in the hierarchy of military conflicts and what methods they emphasize. Hung and Hung, Tashev and Ninov, Borisova and Dragova [6] do not consider cognitive warfare as a completely separate phenomenon. For Hung and Hung, Ninov, Borisova and Dragova, it is a subset of hybrid warfare. For Tashev, it is simply an aspect of information warfare or part of the overall portfolio of national power. Miller, Backes and Swab define it as a separate field with specific objectives, such as response management and psychological harm, distinct from cyber or information warfare. In terms of operational threshold and scope, Miller strictly positions cognitive warfare as an activity that operates below the threshold of conventional conflict to subtly undermine institutions. Unlike Miller, the NATO definitions and Chinese concepts allow for cognitive warfare to be conducted in both peacetime and wartime, and may also include kinetic actions to achieve psychological effect. The authors also emphasize different methods depending on national doctrines. In the Chinese model, Hung and Hung emphasize the manipulation of environmental stimuli and the connection with the three wars – psychological, public opinion and legal. In the Russian model, Tashev and Hansen [7] point to information operations as part of a massive, state-led approach to influence. The Western/NATO model focuses on technology, the protection of democratic institutions, individual psychology and the resilience of society. Conceptually, it is important to distinguish cognitive from information warfare and psychological operations. While in information warfare the processes are related to the control and flow of information, in psychological operations (PSYOPS) the object of influence is emotions and attitudes, often through messages. Cognitive warfare is aimed at the very mechanisms of cognition – how the brain processes information to form understanding and make decisions [8]. The main focus is on changing how people think, not just what they think.

From the analysis made, for the needs of the report, the following definition can be formulated:

"Cognitive warfare is the integration of technological, informational, and psychological capabilities to manipulate perceptions and behavior, with the aim of disorienting the adversary's decision-making processes and achieving strategic effects comparable to or superior to those of kinetic force."

B. Doctrinal and conceptual foundations of cognitive warfare

a) NATO's approach – collective defense in the cognitive domain.

NATO's Strategic Communications (StratCom) doctrine provides the institutional context for the Alliance's approach to the information environment. StratCom is defined as the coordinated use of public diplomacy, public relations, military public relations, information operations and PSYOPS to achieve Alliance objectives [9]. Events such as the conflict in Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 have exposed the limitations of this traditional approach. The main focus of NATO's adaptation has been on developing a specific concept of cognitive warfare, guided by NATO ACT. It states that adversaries actively target the cognitive dimension to undermine public cohesion and political will [3]. NATO's working definition is: "activities conducted in concert with other instruments of power to influence attitudes and behaviour by influencing, protecting and/or disrupting individual and group knowledge in order to gain advantage" [10]. NATO's strategy is defensive, focusing on strengthening the cognitive infrastructure of its member states. The primary objective is to build societal resilience. This approach is consistent with the concept of deterrence by denial, which aims to deter an attack by making it unlikely to succeed. The creation of a dedicated cognitive warfare concept within a military command (ACT) marks a major bureaucratic and philosophical shift in NATO, recognizing that societal cohesion is now a formal military-strategic issue. Traditionally, military commands have focused on kinetic operations and physical domains, while societal issues are the responsibility of political authorities. The creation of an Applied Cognitive Effects (ACE) team within HQ SACT and the assignment of ACT to develop a military concept of cognitive warfare formalizes the idea that the cognitive space is a domain of military operations. This blurs the lines between civilian and military responsibilities. NATO's military wing is now developing doctrine to defend not only its physical domains but also the cognitive space. This suggests a future in which military planning must deeply integrate socio-political analysis and where civil-military cooperation becomes a central, rather than an ancillary, component of defense strategy.

b) The doctrine of the United States – the pursuit of information superiority.

The traditional US approach to information operations (IO) is defined by its five pillars – electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOPS), military deception (MILDEC), and operational security (OPSEC). This model is often viewed as a specialized capability. The publication in 2023 of Army Publication (ADP) 3-13, "Information" [11] and the establishment of the Joint Concept for Information Advantage (JCIA) in the same year marked a significant doctrinal shift. These documents reframe information as a combat power dynamic and emphasize a combined arms approach. The central concept in the new doctrine is that every service member has a role in the information

environment – it is no longer the exclusive domain of narrow specialists. Every action, image, and statement generates information effects [12]. While the previous JCOIE concept (2018) laid the foundations for the integration of physical and information power, the new JCIA framework (2023) completes this cycle. It harmonizes the efforts of all types of armed forces, emphasizing decision superiority and shaping the behavior of participants to achieve lasting strategic results. In this context, the United States is actively developing offensive cognitive warfare capabilities, seen as a force multiplier. The goal is to achieve cognitive dominance through narrative dominance [13]. In the defensive plan, the theory of information inoculation ("pre-bunking") is applied. Through it, supported by artificial intelligence systems, military personnel build cognitive resilience against disinformation in real time [14].

c) Russian Doctrine – The Art of Reflective Governance.

Reflexive control is defined as a means of transmitting specially prepared information to an adversary in order to induce him to voluntarily make a predetermined decision that is advantageous to the initiator [15]. The goal is to control the adversary's decision-making process itself. The main mechanism is the manipulation of key factors in the adversary's perception of the world so that he logically reaches the desired conclusion. Russia implements reflexive control as a holistic, continuous strategic effort, conducted in both peacetime and wartime. It is not a separate line of action, but is integrated with kinetic, diplomatic, and economic actions. Reflexive control is not a reactive measure, but a doctrine of prevention, which is inherently a long-term shaping operation. Therefore, it is not simply a wartime tactic, but a strategic approach to international relations. This method views cognitive space as a constant battlefield, where the goal is to continuously degrade the adversary's decision-making autonomy, thereby preventing effective resistance. The Russian model of cognitive warfare is deeply integrated with its intelligence services and state structure, giving it a unity of effort that decentralized, democratic alliances find difficult to effectively counter. Russia can execute a holistic, long-term cognitive strategy with a single goal, while Western responses are often fragmented, slower, and constrained by legal and political divisions. This is a structural advantage for Russia in the cognitive domain.

d) Chinese Doctrine – From the Three Wars to Intelligent Warfare and Cognitive Domination.

The foundation of the Chinese approach is the Three Wars doctrine, formally adopted in 2003. This doctrine integrates three interrelated strategies that are applied continuously in both peacetime and wartime – public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare [16]. With the development of technology, especially artificial intelligence, Chinese military thought has evolved towards the concept of intelligentized warfare [17]. In this new paradigm, the cognitive domain is seen as the decisive battlefield, even more important than the physical domains. Chinese strategists argue that whoever controls the cognitive domain can achieve victory by directly influencing the adversary's brain, its emotions, motives, and decisions. This approach integrates the Three Wars with the latest advances in neuroscience, artificial intelligence, big data, and social media to achieve cognitive control or mind domination. The goal is to achieve strategic advantage by shaping perceptions and destabilizing adversary societies even in peacetime. The Chinese approach is holistic and encompasses the whole of government, blurring the lines between military and civilian, peace and war [18].

The differences between the approaches of the countries examined to cognitive warfare are significant. They are rooted in different strategic cultures, political systems, and philosophies of warfare. NATO's core strategic logic is resilience. Their concept is defensive, focused on strengthening society to resist attack. It is reactive and prioritizes preserving the integrity of the democratic system. The US approach is focused on gaining and maintaining the initiative. It is proactive and views the information environment as a domain of continuous struggle for better position and gaining advantage. The Eastern school applies a holistic approach. The Russian concept is offensive, focused on manipulating and undermining the will of the adversary. It is preventive and aims to completely dominate the adversary's decision-making process. China applies a concept focused on achieving cognitive control and victory without fighting. It is comprehensive, long-term, and integrates all instruments of national power. The goal is to shape the strategic environment in one's favor to achieve dominance.

C. Integrating cognitive warfare into operational art

The very definition of operational art as a cognitive approach means that it is inherently the framework for conducting cognitive warfare. Military planning, especially at the operational level, is a cognitive process of understanding complex, unstructured problems and designing solutions. The connection between operational art and cognitive warfare is that all military outcomes are ultimately cognitive. The moment one side accepts that it has been defeated, regardless of its remaining physical capacity, is defeat. This is a cognitive state. Even humanitarian operations depend on the perceptions and decisions of the population being assisted. Therefore, the cognitive dimension – defined as the mind of the decision maker or a specific audience – is the terrain on which information functions are conducted. Operational art must plan operations that purposefully shape this terrain.

The transition from a doctrinal concept to an operational application of cognitive warfare requires changes in the way operations are planned. Operational design is the conceptual component of planning. It helps the commander understand the environment, define the problem, and develop a broad operational approach before detailed planning begins. It is at this stage that cognitive goals must be formulated. Rather than focusing solely on physical end states, operational designers must define the desired cognitive end state. By defining the problem in

cognitive terms, operational design can guide planning toward identifying nonphysical centers of gravity. Traditionally, the center of gravity has been sought among physical objects – enemy forces, command centers, key infrastructure. In the cognitive era, the center of gravity is increasingly shifting to intangible factors – public opinion in the adversary state, the political will of its leadership, the unity of a given military alliance, or even trust in the economic system. Integrating cognitive warfare requires modifications to the operational planning process. Mission analysis must be expanded to provide a deeper understanding of cultural narratives, social norms, psychological vulnerabilities, key influencers, and information pathways of target audiences. When developing options for action (COA), headquarters should include cognitive lines of effort as core components, not add-ons. A COA can synchronize a physical maneuver, a cyberattack, and a targeted disinformation campaign to disrupt an adversary's decision-making. COA analysis is the most challenging. It is essentially an evaluation of maneuver and firepower. Influence wargaming is fundamentally different. It must simulate human factors such as attitudes, behavior, motivation, media influence, and the spread of disinformation. These games must account for uncertainty and rapidly changing attitudes, making impact assessment extremely difficult. Modeling human decision-making is a complex task for which current tools are often inadequate. The problem with war games translates directly to the assessment of cognitive influence in real-world operations, with the main difficulty being the limited tools. [8]. Bazalgette and Janin propose a measure of cognitive entropy – a measure of information chaos and the breakdown of shared narratives in a given society. This approach identifies seven cognitive domains – national belonging; moral ecology; social norms; historical memory; institutional legitimacy; strategic autonomy and interethnic cohesion. Their interaction can be mapped to identify cognitive instability. In this model, artificial intelligence can play an observational role, detecting changes in narratives and measuring cognitive transitions, supporting human analysis [19].

Multi-domain operations (MDO) is the current operational concept of the United States and NATO, which emphasizes the synchronization of military activities across all operational domains (land, air, sea, space and cyberspace). The integration of cognitive warfare raises a fundamental doctrinal question – is the cognitive dimension simply an effect that manifests itself in all domains, or is it its own, separate domain? The NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC) introduces the imperative of Cognitive Superiority. The document explains that future conflicts will be characterized by a fusion of dimensions, and the ability to understand and influence the cognitive sphere will be crucial to victory [20]. With AJP-01 (Allied Joint Doctrine), NATO officially introduces the concept of MDO. The doctrine states that NATO forces operate in five domains – Maritime, Land, Air, Space and Cyberspace, but their goal is to generate effects in three dimensions – physical, virtual and cognitive [21]. The Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations (AJP-10.1) explicitly states that the information environment is a layered battlefield composed of these three dimensions. It defines the cognitive dimension as the critical dimension because, ultimately, every physical action aims to change the behavior or decision of the adversary [22]. These NATO doctrinal documents suggest that actions in the five physical and virtual domains generate effects in the physical, virtual, and cognitive dimensions. The US military openly states its desire for cognitive dominance as a key factor in MDO. NATO's concept of cognitive warfare also treats it as a battlefield. Some analysts and military structures support the establishment of a cognitive domain. However, there is a strong counterargument that the addition of a cognitive domain unnecessarily complicates military planning. This argument argues that cognitive effects are so strongly intertwined with all other domains that they cannot be isolated. According to this perspective, cognitive aspects are better managed within the information domain or as an integral part of planning in any other domain [23].

Regardless of the doctrinal debate, the consensus is that modern operational art must be concerned with the synchronization of cognitive effects. It becomes the art of creating convergent dilemmas – using the speed and integration of combat networks to overload the adversary's decision-making cycle by attacking not only its physical infrastructure but also its cognitive integrity.

Integrating cognitive warfare into operational art is fraught with enormous challenges, both in offensive and defensive operations. The very act of planning for cognitive warfare exposes staffs to the risk of cognitive overload. Human cognition is a finite resource. Adding the extremely complex and uncertain cognitive dimension to an already busy planning process can lead to analysis paralysis, mental fatigue, and ultimately worse, less flexible plans. The more complex the problem, the more likely it is that people will resort to suboptimal strategies. The use of artificial intelligence can be a powerful weapon in conducting cognitive warfare and a key tool in dealing with it. It can take on the heavy lifting, quickly analyze and compare COAs, and present commanders with predictions of alternative future events, thereby reducing cognitive load and enabling better decision-making.

IV. Conclusions

This paper examines the transformation of operational art in the context of cognitive warfare through a systematic and comparative analysis of leading military doctrines. Internal differentiation within the Western bloc is revealed. While the NATO model is defined as reactive-defensive, focused on building shared cognitive resilience, the US model is markedly proactive and offensive-oriented, striving to achieve cognitive dominance and information superiority by actively shaping the perceptions of the enemy. The Eastern model is proactive-offensive, aimed at complete domination over the enemy's decision-making processes. It is established that cognitive warfare reformulates the concept of defeat. It is no longer defined by the physical destruction of forces, but as cognitive paralysis – a state in which the subject loses the will to resist and the ability to rationally manage. The analysis enters the role of artificial intelligence and big data as factors that industrialize cognitive influence. The

conclusion is that digital hyper-connectivity is turning the very architecture of modern society into its greatest strategic vulnerability. The integration of cognitive warfare into operational art represents its next evolutionary phase. The cognitive dimension is not simply an additional effect, but the critical space in which the outcome of modern MDOs is decided. Decisive success no longer depends solely on physical maneuvering, but on achieving cognitive superiority through the synchronization of physical, virtual, and psychological effects. A doctrinal adaptation is needed so that cognitive lines of effort are embedded as an integral part of military decision-making and operational design, rather than as isolated ancillary functions. An interdisciplinary approach is recommended in future research and command training to bring together military science, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and data analytics to more accurately map the cognitive environment. It is critically important to create new scientific methods for measuring the effect in the cognitive domain, which will replace traditional quantitative indicators with qualitative analyses of behavioral changes. To form strategic resilience, at the national security level, it is recommended to invest in cognitive inoculation through education and civil-military cooperation, which will protect society from algorithmically automated disinformation.

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