

EXCLUSIVE
FOREWORD

Cognitive WARFARE

The Battle for Minds

Admiral Pierre Vandier

French Navy
Supreme Allied Commander Transformation



Above
Admiral Pierre Vandier

IN TODAY'S UNCERTAIN and fast-evolving strategic environment, we find ourselves under constant siege as cognitive war rages. It is the stark reality of contemporary conflict, where traditional boundaries between peace, crisis and war have evaporated and where the human mind is a primary target. Every hour of every day, our adversaries are expending time and effort in order to fragment our societies, sow doubt and undermine NATO unity and cohesion.



"War is here, lurking in the **grey zone**, and victory requires nothing less than our complete **commitment to defending the minds and values** that define who we are as free nations."

Recent studies estimate that Russia spends up to 2 billion U.S. dollars annually on cognitive warfare operations,¹ funding destructive social and psychological manipulation campaigns, including sophisticated disinformation, conspiracy theories, and large-scale bot networks.

At Allied Command Transformation (ACT), we recognize that cognitive warfare represents far more than an evolution in information operations. It constitutes a paradigm shift that challenges our most fundamental assumptions about deterrence and defence.

In his OODA loop (observe, orient, decide, act), John Boyd pointed to how uncertainty and confusion in an adversary's decision-making cycle can produce paralysis and bring about collapse.

Today's cognitive warriors have weaponized this insight,² systematically targeting the orientation phase to degrade our collective judgment, distort our perceptions, and ultimately compromise our ability to act decisively in defence of our shared values.

The brain has become a new war zone, both as a target and a weapon. Our adversaries understand that a cognitive knockout can forestall wins in the land, maritime, air, cyberspace or space domains. They therefore seek to contest our decision space, manipulate our populations, and ultimately deprive us of our freedom of choice through sustained campaigns that operate in the grey zone, below the traditional threshold of armed conflict.

This reality demands a mental shift in how we conceive of security challenges. We often speak of cognitive warfare as a future concern, warning that "we will lose the fight when it comes." But the fight is here. The question we must ask ourselves — as military leaders, as Alliance members, as defenders of democratic values — is whether we are ready to participate

in a war that is already underway. Can we defend our cognitive ground? Can we shape the perceived battlespace of our adversaries?

ACT'S JOINT WARFARE CENTRE has long served as NATO's training focal point for both operational- and strategic-level exercises, supporting the Alliance through the injection of new concepts and doctrines in exercises. Today, operationalizing NATO's Cognitive Warfare Concept represents one of our most critical contributions to Alliance defence. Without cognitive superiority, our conventional deterrence and defence capabilities risk becoming irrelevant. We could lose battles before they have even begun.

The articles in this edition of *The Three Swords* examine these challenges from multiple perspectives, offering insights from practitioners, researchers, and strategic thinkers who are grappling with the practical implications of cognitive warfare. From tactical applications in military operations to strategic communication challenges, from ethical considerations to technological solutions, these contributions reflect the breadth and complexity of weaponized cognition.

Meeting these challenges requires mental agility, critical thinking, and human expertise applied with unprecedented coordination across the Alliance. It calls for innovation in how we train our forces, educate our fellow citizens, and defend our information environment. Most importantly, it requires trust, unity of purpose and action across the whole Alliance.

THE SCALE AND SOPHISTICATION of cognitive threats targeting NATO cannot be overstated. Every social media platform, every news cycle, every public debate has become a potential battleground where truth competes with fabrication, where democratic discourse

faces systematic manipulation, and where the very foundations of informed citizenship are under assault. But we are not passive victims in this contest. ACT is constantly on the lookout for future challenges and develops the capabilities necessary to address them. Together, we can build the cognitive defences our Alliance requires while maintaining our commitment to open societies and democratic values.

This issue concerns not only our military forces but society as a whole. It is a challenge that requires strong commitment and determination from political leadership, civil institutions, the private sector, and every individual. By acting together decisively and purposefully, will we ensure that cognitive superiority remains firmly within NATO's grasp. The future of our Alliance, of our collective strategic interests and core values, may well depend on how effectively we meet this challenge.

As you engage with the ideas presented in this review, remember that cognitive warfare is not merely an academic exercise or a distant strategic concern. It is the defining security challenge of our time, one that demands both intellectual rigor and practical action from every member of the Alliance community.

The time for half-measures has passed. War is here, lurking in the grey zone, and victory requires nothing less than our complete commitment to defending the minds and values that define who we are as free nations. ✦

ENDNOTES

- 1 Seizing the Edge in Cognitive Warfare, Michael Miklaucic, Centre for the Study of Democracy, 3 July 2025, <https://csd.eu/blog/blogpost/2025/07/03/seizing-the-edge-in-cognitive-warfare/>
- 2 The Dialectic of Deception: John Boyd and the Cognitive Battlefield, War on the Rocks, 4 September 2025 <https://warontherocks.com/2025/09/the-dialectic-of-deception-john-boyd-and-the-cognitive-battlefield/>