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INTRODUCTION



NATO Global Perceptions – Views from the Asia-Pacific Region

Natalia Chaban, Paul Bacon, Joe Burton, and Vlad Vernygora

ABSTRACT

In a world characterized by shifts in global power, NATO's partnerships – in Europe as well as elsewhere – are critical for the organization. Yet the question of how the Alliance's global partners perceive NATO in the context of cooperative security, collective defence, and crisis management – including NATO's goals, operational capacity, functional capability, and influence – remains impressionistic and under-addressed. This paper launches discussion about images and perceptions of NATO in the alliance's five global partners in the Asia-Pacific (Australia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea). It treats perceptions as key factors behind global expectations of NATO, and as a key cultural filter triggering a range of its partners' reactions to NATO's global initiatives. The paper sets out and explains the theoretical framework used for the Special Issue, Miskimmon et al.'s 'strategic narrative' theory, and explains how each of the articles respectively emphasize the formation, projection/communication and reception of NATO's strategic narratives in the region. Contributions focus on external perceptions, images, and narratives of NATO after the end of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan, and post-Crimea, and are discussed in a post-US election context.

NATO's "Partners across the Globe" initiative is a powerful mechanism to address traditional and non-traditional security threats in the context of cooperative security, collective defense, and crisis management. These are NATO's three "core tasks" in tackling threats that have a global nature and transcend borders. The cooperative security approach in particular is expected to enhance collaboration between Global Partners in dealing with security challenges, while utilizing and maximizing NATO's political and military capabilities. Global multipolar redesign comes with tectonic changes for the global security framework. In a world characterized by shifts in global power, NATO's partnerships – in Europe as well as elsewhere – are critical for the organization. Yet the question of how the alliance's global partners *perceive* NATO in the context of cooperative security, collective defense, and crisis management – including its goals, operational capacity, functional capability, and influence – remains impressionistic and under-addressed.

This Special Issue of *Asian Security* focuses on the Alliance's five global partners in the Asia-Pacific (Australia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea). It systematically traces external perceptions and images that feed into narratives communicated by leading opinion-making discourses in the five Asia-Pacific countries, and which emerge in the opinions of stakeholders in these five locations who are receiving NATO's messages. The Special Issue treats perceptions as key factors behind global expectations of NATO and a key cultural filter triggering a range of its Partners' reactions to NATO global initiatives. The Special Issue studies perceptions, images, and narratives towards the cooperative security, crisis management, and collective defense concepts in the Asia-Pacific region. It also examines how the partnerships fit into each of these three core tasks of NATO, and undertakes comparisons between localized understandings in the five aforementioned NATO partners in the region, contrasting these views with NATO's own vision of the concepts. Timing is critical for this Special Issue – contributions are focused on external perceptions, images, and narratives of NATO after the International

Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan and post-Crimea, and are discussed in a post-US election context.

A set of research questions guide all contributions to this Special Issue:

- Does the changing architecture of the world, and “rising Asia” in particular, influence how NATO’s Asia-Pacific Partners see themselves in embracing these priorities?
- Do the Asia-Pacific Partners see an increased relevance in their partnership with NATO or are they distancing themselves from NATO?
- How do perceptions, images, and narratives of NATO in the Asia-Pacific help us understand expectations of NATO in Australia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, and Republic of Korea?
- How do the most recent geopolitical shifts and events – after the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan and post-Crimea – affect and re-calibrate the perceptions, images, and narratives of NATO in the Asia-Pacific region?
- How far do NATO’s security priorities such as counter-terrorism, energy and environmental security, or cyber security and Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defense (CBRN) agents resonate with the Asia-Pacific Partners?
- How do external images and narratives compare with NATO’s self-images and narratives as a cooperative security, collective defense, and crisis management actor?
- Will NATO have to send a stronger, better-defined message? And to which audiences in particular?

The answers to these questions are considered in this Special Issue in the context of NATO’s contemporary diplomatic practice in the context of cooperative security, crisis management, and collective defense. Narratives, perceptions, and images of the three core tasks are considered within different security contexts – both traditional and non-traditional – and with respect to emerging security challenges, such as nuclear proliferation, energy security, and cyber security, as well as the renewed emphasis within the alliance on collective defence as a reaction to the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

Such a focus on the images of NATO as a security partner for the “rising” Asia-Pacific is unique and novel in the academic field of International Relations (IR). Notwithstanding the global importance of NATO, the Alliance has not been rigorously studied within the context of IR external perceptions. While research into external perceptions, images, and narratives of NATO is emerging,¹ the existing literature is impressionistic and descriptive in nature and lacks systematic comparison across locations, evaluation of differences between external and self-perceptions and narratives, and application of inferential statistical tools (for a more detailed review of the NATO perceptions literature and methods employed in the field, see the article by Chaban et al. in this Special Issue).

Moreover, the Asia-Pacific is rarely the focus of these studies, with previous scholarly attention focused on NATO members themselves and partners in the southern and eastern neighborhoods. The changing context of Asian security has created new debates within the alliance that are unresolved and understudied. There is uncertainty in Brussels about how the alliance should react to the ongoing rise of China and the increased focus of the US on the Asia-Pacific region over the past decade. Ongoing tensions in the East and South China seas and on the Korean peninsula have created new concerns in Europe about global stability and the strength of the rules-based international order. Asia is a vital region for European powers not solely because of globalized security issues but because it is increasingly a “tent pole” of the global economy and a source of growth for European exports. China’s recent announcement of its Belt and Road Initiative has intensified debates about the extent of NATO engagement in Asia and has highlighted the difficulty of forging a common and cohesive strategic approach to the region within Europe. NATO’s relationships with its global partners have the potential to generate political, military, and economic gains for the Alliance, but create costs too, including contributing to heightened tensions with China. Much of the research on NATO’s partnerships, moreover, took place before the annexation of Crimea and the

Russia–Ukraine conflict. The changing geopolitical situation in Europe and Asia places new emphasis on the need for analyses that link the two security environments and assess the global impact of localized geopolitical disputes. There is also a need for “issue-specific” external perceptions research, including studies focusing on counter-terrorism, energy and environmental security, cyber security, and CBRN agents. This Special Issue innovatively addresses these shortcomings and knowledge gaps.

Theoretical framework

The multidisciplinary research into perceptions, images, and narratives of NATO presented in the Special Issue is grounded in strategic narrative theory² and this theory’s innovative synergy with cascading activation framing theory.³ The Special Issue’s contributions address three thematic foci:

- (1) The contribution of external narratives, images, and perceptions into definition of NATO’s roles and conceptualizations in a post-Cold War world and a changing security environment;
- (2) The role of external narratives, images, and perceptions in NATO’s global dialogues when working with the global partners; and
- (3) The degree to which external narratives, images, and perceptions reflect NATO’s commitment to crisis management at all stages (with a stress on preventing crises), including humanitarian crises.

Research into the three thematic foci is informed by strategic narrative theory that focuses on the strategy and intent of an actor communicating within an IR setting. Utilizing the notion of a narrative as a “meaning created through representation of a time sequence, causally relating separate events, with a past-present-future structure, and indication of possible resolutions,”⁴ the authors of the theory define strategic narratives as a “tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environments in which they operate.”⁵ The dynamic character of strategic narratives is central within the concept – they become “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.”⁶ Through strategic narratives, an IR actor seeks to be an actor “other nations listen to, rely on and emulate out of respect and admiration.”⁷

The building blocks of a narrative, according to Burke,⁸ are: characters/agents; a setting for an action; environment or scene; a conflict or action; tools and behavior actors use to address it; and a resolution. These concepts informed the protocol of the media content analysis as well as elite opinion analyses in the five locations – respectively, we traced which NATO actors and actions were the most visible, which actors were seen as NATO’s adversaries, what tools and settings were associated with NATO, and whether NATO was seen to contribute to the resolution of conflicts. The theoretical model also identifies the constitutive *elements*, *levels*, and *phases* that guided our analysis of NATO images in the five locations covered in this Special Issue.

According to Miskimmon et al.,⁹ the three levels within the model are: the *system* level (how actors are positioned within the international order), the *identity* level (how identities of an IR actor are negotiated and contested), and the *issue* level (how the actor shapes and influences specific policy issues). Importantly, for Chaban et al., “alignment between system, policy and identity narratives increases opportunities for persuasion and influence.”¹⁰ Contributions to this Special issue investigate NATO images feeding into the three levels – looking at country-specific alignments or clashes (see Bacon and Burton on Japan), as well as comparing across countries (see Yoon et al. on Mongolia and the Republic of Korea, Wellings et al. on Australia and New Zealand, and Chaban et al.). The Special Issue also offers an insight into NATO’s perceptions of its own strategic narratives and levels within them (see Burton).

Finally, the theory identifies phases in the narrative cycle – from *formation*, to *projection/communication*, and on to *reception*. For Miskimmon et al.,¹¹ *formation* is about the process flow; *projection/*

communication is about communication flow; and *reception* is about answers to two questions – how an IR actor is recognized, and whether it is perceived to be worth emulating. *Reception* also aspires to trace the connectivity between the producers of IR outcomes and the international receivers of those outcomes – via the producer or bypassing it. The thrust of the Special Issue is a consideration of NATO's strategic narrative(s) and their *reception* in the five countries studied.

Our project and this Special Issue implement an analysis of this narrative cycle, and follow the logic of this phased approach. First, we studied *formulation* – NATO messages with a special focus on the concepts of cooperative security, collective defense, and crisis management (see the article by Burton focusing on NATO's formation of narratives). Second, we explored how NATO and its messages are *communicated* in the five Asia-Pacific locations via influential traditional news media, bypassing NATO as at the producer of the IR outcomes (see the article by Chaban, Beltyukova and Fox focusing on the media analysis of NATO images and narratives). Finally, we studied how NATO's narratives are *received* (see articles by Bacon and Burton, Yoon et al., and Wellings et al. focusing on elite perceptions of NATO in five Asia-Pacific partner countries). Our aim is to identify points of convergence or divergence in the narratives through which the target audiences of NATO's diplomacy understand international politics and the role of NATO in it.

Methods, structure, and main findings

Strategic narrative theory is employed to trace and assess the extent to which NATO's attempts to engage with partner foreign policy elites has been a success, with special attention to *reception* by foreign elites. This Special Issue reflects on data from 149 semi-structured elite interviews in the five countries (29 interviews in Australia, 30 in each of the other countries). These included policy-makers, members of parliament, representatives from political parties involved with security matters, diplomats, officials from ministries of foreign affairs and defense, military and intelligence officials, academics (including researchers and professors who reflect on security matters and educate diplomats and security practitioners), think-tankers connected to foreign and security policymaking, reporters of international and security affairs, and editors of influential national media outlets (including specialized publications with a focus on military affairs). In addition, the Special Issue analyzes data from 18 interviews with NATO officials at the organization's headquarters in Brussels.¹² Images and narratives of NATO communicated by the influential press in the Asia-Pacific are traced in the daily coverage of 16 leading newspapers in the five studied countries, observed in February–July 2015 (total sample 387 articles).

The article by Joe Burton, "NATO's Global Partners in Asia: A Shifting Strategic Narrative," considers the *formulation* and *projection* of narratives by NATO itself. The article draws on interviews at NATO Headquarters in Brussels and analyzes how NATO officials perceive the alliance's global partnerships with Australia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea in the context of NATO's three core tasks – collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. The article argues that NATO's strongest current narratives are based on dual threats on the alliance's eastern and southern flanks and that there has been a degree of retrenchment after the long and arduous common International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. However, NATO's global partners are still seen as useful and important in the context of the southern flank and of emerging security issues, such as cyber security, counterterrorism, and maritime security.

Three following articles elaborating the country specific cases consider the *reception* element of the strategic narrative cycle.

In "NATO–Japan Relations: Projecting Strategic Narratives of 'Natural Partnership' and Cooperative Security," Paul Bacon and Joe Burton identify two strategic narratives, which have been successfully communicated in the context of NATO–Japan relations. The first of these is "natural partnership" combined with "strategic parallelism." The second is that of cooperative security. They argue that NATO clearly demonstrated an ability to formulate and project the

narrative of natural partnership and strategic parallelism to Japan, although it should be acknowledged that Japan had already embraced both elements of the narrative itself. In the case of cooperative security, they suggest that it was more Japan's readiness and commitment to be a receiver of the narrative, which was doing most of the work, rather than the inherent quality of NATO's formulation and projection efforts per se. Bacon and Burton explain that one key aspect of the natural partners/strategic parallelism narrative is that NATO projected this message towards Russia, and Japan projected towards China. There is also the issue of reception by Russia and China. NATO and Japan have both defected from a robust defense of strategic parallelism, NATO by failing to adequately respond to Russian aggression in the Crimea, and Japan by seeking rapprochement with Putin's Russia. Both thereby undermined the reception of this narrative in Russia and China as credible. Finally, despite the return/development of more pressing hard security concerns in their respective regions, NATO and Japan remain committed to both the narrative and the practice of cooperative security. Bacon and Burton identify several areas of past cooperation and two areas, maritime and cyber, which have provided important opportunities for NATO–Japan cooperation in the past and could do so again in the future.

A comparative case study by Ben Wellings, Bruce Wilson, Serena Kelly, and Joe Burton, "Strategic Alignment and Misalignment: NATO as a Global Actor as seen from Australia and New Zealand," follows. The article compares NATO's perceptions, images, and narratives in two Australasian neighbors – Australia and New Zealand. The two share many commonalities in their cultural, political, and economic profiles, yet their perceptions of NATO and the security environment subtly diverge. Australians are more likely to see NATO as a constructive force in the region, for example, than their peers in New Zealand. Differences in the reception of NATO's strategic narratives in the two countries also suggest limitations to the effectiveness of NATO's persuasion and influence in Australia and New Zealand. Overall, the authors find that despite high-level support for the relationships with NATO and notwithstanding the participation of both countries in the Afghan mission, the perception of the NATO partnerships in Australia and New Zealand is that they have limited traction.

Another comparative case study – this time focusing on Mongolia and the Republic of Korea's relationship with NATO – is provided by Sung-Won Yoon, Adiyasuren Jamiyandagva, Vlad Vernygora, Joe Burton, Byambakhand Luguusharav, and Munkhtur Dorjraa: "Views on NATO from Mongolia and the Republic of Korea: Hedging Strategy, and 'Perfunctory Partnership'?" While diametrically different in many respects, the two Asian nations are facing the same challenge of factoring powerful and sometimes troublesome neighbors into the scope of their foreign policy-related activities. In the Mongolian case, the authors find significant evidence of a "hedging" narrative among elites, which encapsulates concerns about how partnership with NATO will affect Mongolia's relationship with Russia and China. In the Republic of Korea, the primacy of the country's bilateral relationship with the United States is clearly evident, but NATO is seen as a useful additional partner, particularly in the area of non-traditional security challenges.

The Special Issue is concluded by an article that provides a reflection on the *communication* phase in the narrative cycle: "Communicating NATO in the Asia-Pacific Press: Comparative Analysis of Patterns of NATO's Visibility, Capability, Evaluation, and Local Resonance" by Natalia Chaban, Svetlana Beltyukova, and Christine Fox. Based on a content analysis of 387 articles reporting NATO in the five partner countries (16 media outlets observed on a daily basis between February–July 2015), the article explores and compares across locations the communication of NATO narratives to broader society on the *system*, *identity*, and *policy-issue* levels. Innovatively linking strategic narrative and cascading activation framing theories, the article explores which narratives enjoyed higher visibility, stronger local resonance, and more pronounced emotive charge while communicating NATO as a capable IR actor. The article operationalizes and modifies elements of Entman's theory (*visibility*, *local resonance*, and *emotive charge*, adding a category of *capability*), and then tests hypotheses based on this, using the Rasch inferential statistics model. The article finds one narrative to be the most communicated in the five locations – NATO in the context of the escalating Russia–Ukraine conflict, as an IR actor of renewed relevance for the world and trans-Atlantic

community possessing (some) capabilities. With Russia framed as NATO's main adversary, NATO was presented in this narrative as a (somewhat) capable actor able to react in different contexts: within the Alliance and beyond its borders (specifically, in its neighborhood). Yet, with the Russia–Ukraine conflict being not resolved, NATO was not profiled as the ultimate deal-breaker in stopping the conflict. With this narrative observed on *system*, *identity*, and *issue* levels, the alignment between the narrative levels suggests a potentially higher impact, intensified by neutral-to-positive media images of NATO in the influential Asia-Pacific press. Yet, assessed with the tools of the statistical inferential Rasch Measurement Model, the narrative was found to enjoy only a modest visibility and a very low local resonance. The article proposes a set of policy recommendations for NATO on how to build on the opportunities that these narratives present to NATO's public diplomacy towards its strategic partners in the Asia-Pacific, and how to tackle challenges of low local resonance and limited media visibility.

Conclusion

In summary, contributions to this Issue examine the *formulation*, *projection*, and *reception* of NATO's messages, image, and narratives towards strategic partners in the Asia Pacific. The elite-focused cases do this through strategic narrative theory, and we complement this analysis by exploring the process of *communicating* NATO's narratives through the medium of influential national presses, using both strategic narrative theory and cascading activation framing theory. Both of these theoretical approaches arrive at the same meta-conclusion – the issue/problem of local resonance. The deficit of local resonance in perceptions, images, and narratives of NATO noted in all contributions to this Special Issue suggests that NATO should revise its approach and tailor location-specific communication strategies.

The Special Issue illuminates four research directions studied in all locations: perceptions, images and narratives of (a) NATO's role in the world, (b) security threats, (c) NATO's partnerships, and (d) NATO's public diplomacy. It features systematic in-depth analysis and comparison of the Asia-Pacific media and decision makers' perceptions, images, and narratives and produces evidence-based results. These findings have clear practical implications for policymaking, especially when NATO is attempting to engage in diplomatic dialogue with the global partners.¹³

Notes

1. See e.g., Robert Pszczel, "How NATO is Perceived in Russia," http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2011/nato_russia/lessons-optimism/EN/index.htm, Accessed 28 August 2017; Mohammed Moustafa Orfy, *NATO and the Middle East: The Geopolitical Context Post-9/11* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2011); Luis Nuno Rodrigues and Volodymyr Dubovyk, *Perceptions of NATO and the New Strategic Concept* (Amsterdam, Berlin, Tokyo, Washington DC: IOS Press ebooks, 2010); Vojtech Mastny, "NATO in the Beholder's Eye: Soviet Perceptions and Policies, 1949–56" (Working Paper No. 35, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2002), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/ACFB01.pdf>, Accessed 28 August 2017; Roland Dannreuther, "Russian Perceptions of the Atlantic Alliance," <http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/95-97/dannreut.pdf>, Accessed 28 August 2017; Federico Casprini, Sonia Lucarelli, and Alessandro Marrone, eds., *Flexible Frameworks, Beyond Borders—Understanding Regional Dynamics to Enhance Cooperative Security* (Brussels: NATO HQ, 2014). Charles Cooper and Benjamin Zycher, "Perceptions of NATO Burden-Sharing," 1989, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2009/R3750.pdf>, Accessed 28 August 2017.
2. A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, and L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
3. Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Robert M. Entman, "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11," *Political Communication* 20, no. 4 (2003), 415–432.
4. S. R. Shenhav, "Political Narratives and Political Reality," *International Political Science Review* 27, no. 3 (2006): 245–62, cited in N. Chaban, A. Miskimmon, and B. O'Loughlin, "The EU's Peace and Security Narrative: Views from EU Strategic Partners in Asia," *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2017). doi:10.1111/jcms.12569.

5. Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, 2.
6. Ibid.
7. A.-M.Slaughter, "Preface," in *A National Strategic Narrative*, edited by W. Porter and M. Mykleby (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, 2011), 2–4. <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/A%20National%20Strategic%20Narrative.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2014).
8. K.Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (New York: Vintage, 1957).
9. Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.
10. Chaban et al., "The EU's Peace and Security Narrative."
11. Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.
12. The questionnaires were approved by a specially appointed Human Ethics Committee from Tallinn University of Technology (Estonia).
13. In the process of this research, our team of contributors presented key findings and policy recommendations at a number of high-profile public events, including an international stakeholder conference in the Asia-Pacific (hosted by the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, March 2016) and the project's final conference organized by the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme and NATO Public Diplomacy Division at the organization's Headquarters (Brussels, February 2017). Contributions to this Issue reflect on the policymaking discussions with practitioners during these events. Exposure to the stakeholders confirmed the novelty and relevance of our research to the Alliance and its global partnerships. Results discussed with practitioners and stakeholders and presented in this Special Issue were found to be relevant for NATO's strategic communication initiatives in the Asia-Pacific, as well as for NATO's Building Integrity Programme, and the organization's Operations division.

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