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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

PG. 2

Upcoming Events: September: NATO Communicators Conference, November: CD & WIN

Research: What's Next in Cog War, Russia AI and Disinformation War, Operation Overlord Update

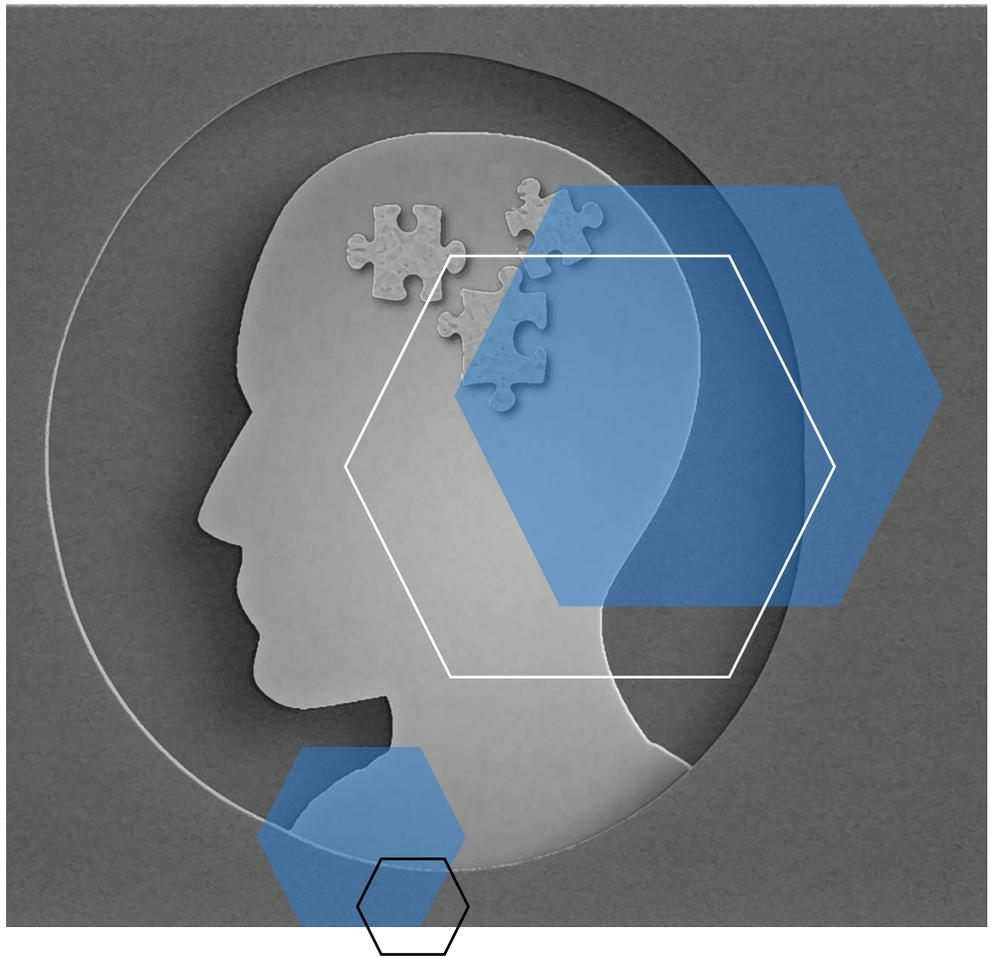
PG. 3

Not Withstanding? An Upbeat Perspective on Societies' Will to Fight May 2025

Article Summary and Impacts

PG. 4

Highlights: Quote and Book of the Month



COGNITIVE WARFARE

FOCUS FOR SEPTEMBER 2025

Welcome to the first issue of **Perception**, ACTs monthly digest of all things Cognitive Warfare. We hope that this newsletter will serve as your *resource for understanding cognitive warfare*, current threats, and technological spaces to better equip the Alliance to defend against and gain advantage in cognitive warfare. Please let us know if your team would like a brief or where we can *coordinate with you* on projects to further enhance the cross-coordination throughout the NATO enterprise. This month we are focused on outreach to the community of interest and how we can make all the interested individuals connect as a network to knowledgeably engage in cognitive warfare.

Our NATO document highlight of the month is the following:

Not Withstanding? An Upbeat Perspective on Societies' Will to Fight May 2025: [Link to Article Here](#) "Too often...we give way to prejudice and fear about those we depend on and overstate the enemy's cohesion and resolve, while casting our own societies as fragmented or passive. This reflects how powerful public narratives can be – and how poorly we often use them." (p.28) (full page summary of the article can be found on page 3)



EVENTS

WHERE TO FIND US AND WHAT WE ARE SUPPORTING

22-25 September 2025 – Nato Communicators Conference – Athens, Greece

NATO Applied Cognitive Effects and Wargaming teams to showcase Behaviour Centric approaches in alliance transformation.

8 October 2025- Digital Frontlines Conference Riga, Latvia

This year, the conference's agenda will cover the future of social media, AI's influence on judgment and rational thinking, vulnerabilities in the gaming space.

17-20 November 2025 - CD & Win Conference 2025 – Verona, Italy

NATO Applied Cognitive Effects and Wargaming teams to showcase Behaviour Centric approaches in alliance transformation.

Layered Resilience Conference / RED Hyena (tbc)

NATO Applied Cognitive Effects and Wargaming teams to showcase Behaviour Centric approaches in alliance transformation.

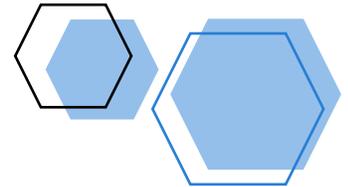


RESEARCH

PAPERS AND PERSPECTIVE EXPANSION

The Ins and Outs of Cognitive Warfare: What's the Next Move: [Link to Article Here](#)

this article advocates for AI implementation into C2 structures, readiness and education at the individual level, and shadow ops across multiple domains.



Russia, AI and the Future of Disinformation Warfare: [Link to Paper Here](#)

This paper generates new insight into Russian disinformation and influence activities by scoping and analysing the online communications channels and information ecosystems of these actors and groups.

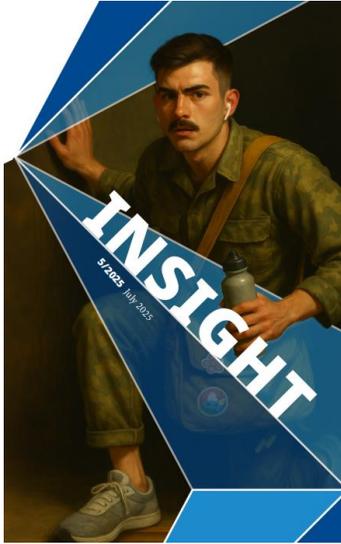
OPERATION OVERLOAD More Platforms, New Techniques, Powered by AI Activity Update - June 2025: [Link to Paper Here](#)

This is an opportunity to go deep to understand techniques, tools, and platforms utilized for foreign influence, an excellent resource for real examples.

NATO STRATCOM's Virtual Manipulation Brief 2025: [Link to Paper Here](#)

This brief highlights tactics to manipulate sentiment towards NATO, to include common phrases in social media.

NOT WITHSTANDING? AN UPBEAT PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIETIES' WILL TO FIGHT MAY 2025



The article argues that a nation's will to fight is both crucial and elusive. Unlike material capabilities, which can be counted and measured, the willingness of citizens to step up in a Ukraine-style conflict is highly uncertain and deeply dependent on context. NATO, for instance, has precise data on weapons, budgets, and troop numbers, yet it *lacks reliable tools for assessing whether its nearly one billion citizens would mobilize in the event of war*. This gap in understanding creates significant strategic risk.

One of the central challenges is what the article calls “elite pessimism.” *Military planners and policymakers are trained to anticipate the worst, which often leads them to assume that modern societies are apathetic, divided, or unwilling to make sacrifices*. While prudent in planning terms, this negativity bias risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

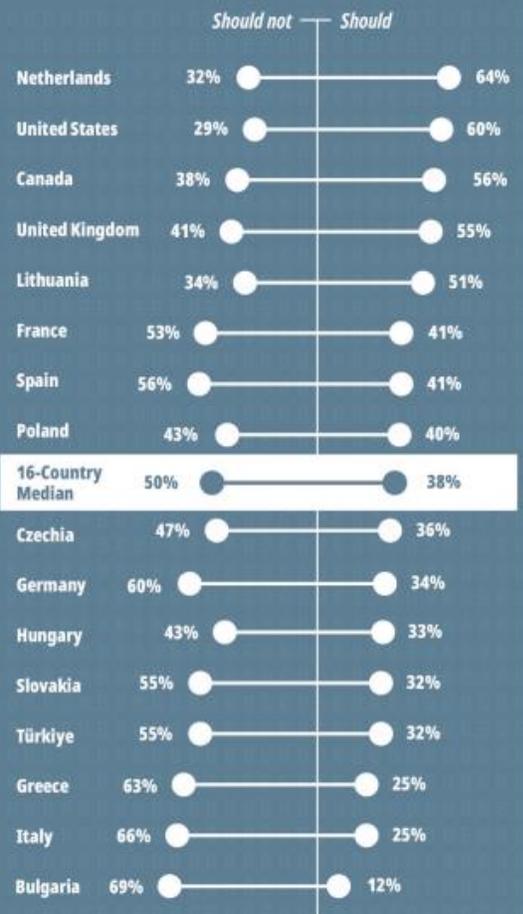
When governments mistrust their people, they hesitate to make demands of them; in turn, citizens, faced with low expectations, are less likely to rise to the occasion.

The article identifies three competing narratives about societal resolve. The first is the post-modern view, which sees contemporary societies as fragmented and distracted by identity politics, incapable of acting collectively against external threats. The second is the post-heroic view, which portrays citizens as comfortable, risk-averse, and unwilling to sacrifice for the common good. By contrast, a third, *transformational view suggests that societies can, under the right conditions, surprise elites and demonstrate resilience*. History supports this last perspective: from Ukraine in 2022 to earlier cases in Europe, societies that appeared complacent nevertheless mobilized effectively when they had a clear purpose, mutual trust, and inspiring leadership.

Trust emerges as the central variable in whether society will fight. Citizens must trust their leaders to act in good faith, and leaders must trust their citizens to endure hardship. When elites underestimate or dismiss public willingness, they inadvertently weaken it. Conversely, when governments project confidence, they can inspire belief and foster collective resolve. *People rarely fight simply to preserve the status quo; they fight when they see conflict to reshape their homeland and secure a better future*.

Finally, the article emphasizes that successful mobilization requires *militaries to adapt to society rather than trying to force society into rigid structures*. Citizens bring with them networks, skills, and motivations that may not fit traditional military molds but can be decisive in wartime. The task, then, is not only to measure a nation's will to fight but to shape it—through imaginative planning, inclusive strategies, and visions of national defense that people can believe in. In short, societal resolve is not predetermined but can be *cultivated by leaders who trust their citizens and inspire them with a future worth defending*. [Link to Article Here](#)

Figure 2: Support for defending another NATO Ally if attacked



Question: If Russia got into a serious military conflict with one of your country's neighbours that is a NATO Ally, should your country use military force to defend it?

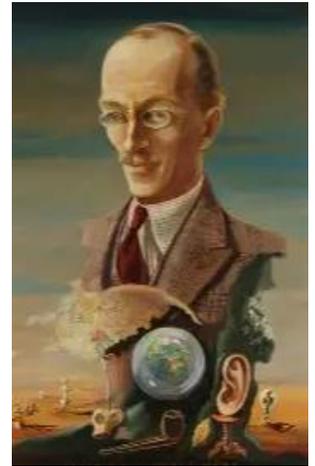
Source: Pew Research Centre (2020)

HIGHLIGHTS

BOOKS, PODCASTS, MOVIES, SOCIAL MEDIA

Quote:

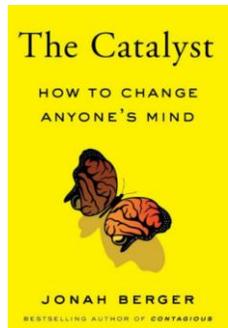
“The real target in war is the mind of the enemy commander, not the bodies of his troops.”
(CAPTAIN SIR BASIL LIDDELL HART THOUGHTS ON WAR, 1944)



Book Deep Dive:

The Catalyst, How to Change Anyone's Mind by Jonah Berger

The book argues that success doesn't come from being more persuasive or overwhelming people with information, but from becoming a catalyst. A catalyst, as the author explains, is someone who removes roadblocks and lowers the barriers to change. It identifies five key barriers that often prevent change and provides practical strategies to overcome them. The focus is on tackling inertia, sparking action and changing minds, not by pushing harder, but by eliminating the obstacles that stand in the way.



What are the most important takeaways?

There are five key barriers to change: reactance, endowment, distance, uncertainty, and corroborative evidence, together remembered by the acronym REDUCE. These can also be thought of as the "five horsemen on inertia", representing the main roadblocks that hinder or slow change.

1. **Reactance:** When pushed, people often push back. Restrictions can trigger a psychological response called reactance – an unpleasant state that arises when people feel their freedom is being threatened or taken away.
2. **Endowment:** People tend to stick with what they already have or do; the longer they own or practice something, the more they value it. This ties into loss aversion: the dislike of giving up what's already theirs. One way to counter this is to highlight the cost of inaction.
3. **Distance:** Big changes sometimes require asking for less, not pushing for more.
4. **Uncertainty:** Change introduces uncertainty, which often causes people to pause and delay decisions. Catalysts reduce this by making change easier to try, to experience.
5. **Corroborative Evidence:** Sometimes, one voice, even a highly credible one, is not enough. Catalysts build corroborative evidence by gathering reinforcement from multiple sources, which provides the social validation people need to move forward.

Social Media Post/Graphic: Increasing your knowledge through visual media. [Unpowering Russia Article Link Here](#)



