War Narratives in a World of Global Information Age
France and the War in Afghanistan

Barbara Jankowski
Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l’École Militaire
IRSEM- France
Barbara.jankowski@defense.gouv.fr

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There is no expectable impact of public reactions on foreign affairs policies, but no political decision-maker would dare declaring that foreign policy decisions can be taken without considering public opinion’s mindset. As Jon Western emphasized it, “elites do not make decisions on the use of force by referendum, but they are sensitive to public opinion on matters related to the use of force”\(^1\). But how do we explain public support to a military intervention and its development as time goes by?

Social scientists have successively focused on different factors to explain public support for a war: first, the justification of the mission (e.g. response to a national threat, humanitarian aid, state building), second the objectives of the operation, third the legitimacy of the intervention, (given for example by a United Nations vote), and last noticeable success perceived by the public in relation to the goals that have been previously defined. On the other hand, one knows today that there is not a unique cause explaining the increasing unpopularity of an intervention. The public disenchantment is a phenomenon induced by several factors interacting one with another. The attention has been long focused on the role of military casualties, but a set of recent studies have assessed that public support does not decline only because the amount of military casualties increases, but because people don’t believe anymore that the military operation can succeed or (and) because they are not sure that the goals were as legitimate as announced, together with an increasing amount of fatalities\(^2\). It is only under these conditions that sensitivity to casualties appears to be


\(^{2}\) After the Vietnam War a majority of decision-makers was convinced that the American people would support future military operations only if ensured that they would not generate military casualties. This perception has been called “casualties aversion” and was shared among media, scholars, U.S. allies as well as U.S. enemies. It is reported that Saddam Hussein used to ironize about the credibility of a threat of intervention coming from a nation that could not support “10 000” fatalities. This phobia, if it came to be proved, represented a real Achilles’ heel for the military. That is the reason why scholars decided to reexamine the “evidence” that was lying on a long set of studies made by academics among whom John Mueller, the first one to assert a causal relation between casualties and public support (John E. Mueller, War, President and Public Opinion, Ohio, The Educational Publisher, Reprinted 2009 (first ed. 1973), followed by the Rand study on the influence of casualties on presidential popularity (Mark A. Lorell, Charles T. Kelley, Deborah R. Hensler, Casualties, public Opinion and Presidential Policy During the Vietnam War, Rand, R-3060-AF, 107 p.). Up to the mid Nineties, their results converged: an increasing amount of casualties was followed by a drop in the public support for the war. Their cases were the Vietnam War and the Korean one. Eric Larson has reconsidered the figures introducing other variables such as chances of success, perception of costs and benefits, leaders’ adaptability to events. He found that American people were not getting more casualties phobic but that they were moved by a cost/benefits analysis. If benefits were perceived, than people would support casualties. (Eric
effective. One could add that casualty’s sensitiveness enlightens the fact that something went wrong in the intervention and that facts people perceive are not congruent with what was announced to potentially happen. In a sense, reactions to casualties serve as bringing to light problems in the course of the intervention.

More recently, the focus on narratives has extended the scope of political science research on the relations between policies (e.g. a decision of military intervention abroad) and their perception in public opinion. Some call it the “narrative turn” in social and political sciences (Bottici 2010). Authors have called attention to the “overall importance of narrative to human communication and cognition” highlighted in the latest neuroscience research claiming the primordial role played by narratives in building the identity because a narrative is found to be a primary means by which individuals organize, process and convey information. The role played by narratives -which is going to be clarified in the paper- can be shortly defined as giving a meaning to events that could be misperceived otherwise.

My paper aims to seek out what have been the narratives developed on the war in Afghanistan and the role they have played in the process of support for the war in France. I will focus on two issues:

- The first part of the paper examines the definitions given to the concept, the usage of narratives in different subfields of public policy and why narratives are a valuable notion for the understanding of the perception of war.

- The second part aims to scrutinize the narratives on the war in Afghanistan such as they have been developed in France by policy-makers, (government, parliament, opponents, and media).

-1- Narratives: Definition and Usages

1.1. Definition

Larson, Casualties and Consensus, MR-726-RC, Rand, 1996, 126 p.). Christopher Gelpi and Peter Feaver were the first ones to criticize the idea of casualty aversion saying it was a myth, and chose the case of the intervention in Somalia and later the war in Iraq to demonstrate it. Their research on the influence of casualties on the public support was the first empirical and in real-time one. Their findings emphasized that prospect of success was a key variable and that people were not casualty phobic but defeat-phobic (Paying the Human Costs of War. American Public Opinion & Casualties in Military Conflicts, Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, Jason Reifler, Princeton University Press, 2009). Another recent contribution is Adam J.Berinsky’s In Time of War. Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq, The University of Chicago Press, 2009. The debate is still on with numerous articles in academic journals (Public Opinion Quarterly, on the APSA website War and Public Opinion, and on Foreign Affairs website, between John Mueller, Peter Feaver, Christopher Gelpi, Adam Berinsky and others.

Michael Jones and Mark McBeth “A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong”, page 330. The authors explain how neuroscience research has found the neural network responsible for narrative cognition and determined that injuries in these parts of the brain are more problematic than others.
Narrative is considered as an “umbrella” concept coming from philosophy and literary theory using “word-based approaches” (Yanov) in which narratives are stories that link together events “in time and space” and represent a way of making sense of the world (Bottici, 2010). Narratives are generally seen as those “stories that are told to explain how things happen” by bringing “connection between events” (Calavera). A narrative is also “a persuasive story that weaves events into an intelligible whole” (Vinson & McDonnell). Jones and McBeth have proposed a definition synthesizing the different contributions of scholars working on the issue since the Nineties4. In their review of literature they stress on the fact that narratives must present a sequence of events tied by a plot and culminating in a “moral to the story”5.

To sum up and give the operating definition for the purpose, a narrative is a story, with temporal sequences of events (Jones and McBeth) that offers an explanation (Vinson and McDonnell) and helps to make sense by linking together events in time and space. A narrative must provide meaning. A series of events, which are not perceived as such by the audience, is not a narrative but a simple juxtaposition of facts. (Botticci).

Policy narratives are considered as having a less broad scope than discourses. A narrative can be part of a discourse if it describes a specific story in line with the broader set of values of a discourse: “discourses relate to modes of thoughts, values and fundamental approaches to issues, whereas narratives define an approach to a specific problem” (Sutton, 1999). Policy narratives are also different from policy framing, in the sense that framing refers to the process defining policy problems and specifically what is included and excluded from the issue that the policy is working on (Sutton, 1999).

1.2. Narratives in Policy Analysis

Although in disciplines as history or literary, narratives have been at the heart of the matter since long, policy analysis have put light on them more recently. What do narratives bring to public policy analysis? Narratives make social issues understandable and accessible especially when facing uncertainty. In policy making, policy narratives are useful for framing an issue and shaping the debate. They help public to adopt an attitude towards the issue the policy is expected to handle. As persuasive stories, narratives make acceptable an action or a policy that people would eventually be reluctant to support.

4 Michael Jones and Mark McBeth, op. cit. p. 329.
5 Their definition is « A narrative is a story with a temporal sequence of events (McComas & Shanahan, 1999) unfolding in a plot (Abel, 2004, Sommers, 1992) that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters (McBeth, Shanahan, & Jones, 2005) that culminates in a moral to the story (Verweij et al., 2006)”.
Emery Roe is the scholar whose work is the most quoted by political scientists as being the first one having applied a narrative analysis to understand a policy process: he made use of a narrative approach, as they were commonly applied in literary theory, to study science controversies (Roe, 1994). Although one could conclude that Roe’s analysis only fits in the specific context of controversies that are highly charged with “uncertainty, complexity and polarization”, a great part of his findings can suit a non-controversial policy, especially when he stresses on the best way to undermine a policy narrative by producing a counter narrative instead of criticizing it.

Hajer and Laws gave a comprehensive approach of how public policy has developed in importing concepts trying to take into consideration complexity and uncertainty through the *process of ordering*⁶. Their contribution is far above the issue under stress, but their idea to relate narratives in politics and policy analysis to the dynamic of ordering and constructing a shared meaning is noteworthy.

Since the past few years many scholars in new sub-fields of research have published a substantial number of articles in various political science journals on issues such as migration policy-making or global climate change, additionally raising methodological debates⁷. Joe Coelmont (2012), trying to understand why the European security project had lost a lot of its attract in the latest years referred to the failure of the first narrative: “no more war between European countries” underscoring that this narrative was not attractive anymore for European people and that there was an urgent need to build a fresh one.

To conclude this short overview a few words about use of narratives in the French policy analysis literature: though public policy analysis has known a large expansion since the Eighties, you do not find any paper in a political science journal focused on narratives, with the exception of Claudio Radaelli’s article surprisingly lonely compared to the Anglo-Saxon profusion (Radaelli, 2000).

Considering the gradual extension of the usage of narratives, strategic narratives and war narratives are the most recent fields implementing narrative investigation.

1.3. Strategic Narratives and War Narratives

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Strategic narratives are state level narratives shaped to influence other states foreign policies. The concept diffused after the publication of Freedman’s article in 2006. The author mentions that the strategic attribute derives from the fact that those narratives are constructed deliberately or reinforced “out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current”. They are “nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others”. Those narratives are strategic not only because they focus on a new field of public policy -security (or foreign) policies- but also because they propose another step in the definition, emphasizing on the ability of the narratives to structure other actors’ postures. With strategic narratives, we are no more on a domestic level policy but in the field of international relations. Moreover, strategic narratives meet another discipline such as political communication, bringing together scholars who intended to bridge communication studies and international relations.

War narratives are those narratives employed to justify a war. They are different from strategic narratives in the sense that they focus on domestic level actors and mostly on public opinion rather than on international actors like foreign states or foreign public opinions. Using narratives to explore our understanding of public support to war is a recent trend in research with a majority of the scholarly literature carried out on the war on terror, like Vinson and McDonnell comparing justificatory narratives of the U.S. and Australian governments to support the war on terror in response to the 9/11 events.

1.4. How do narratives work?

To be effective, a narrative must be coherent, persuasive and it must have an explanatory force. To complete these conditions, narratives must respond to a number of criteria:

- Overall, narratives are processes of telling: A narrative presupposes someone who “tells” the story and an audience that both define the meaning of the story.
- Narrative accounts have beginnings, middles and ends set together by a plot (Yanov, Jones & McBeth). A narrative must move forward, with a conclusion to the events. “Narratives provide meanings because they contain a trajectory”(Bottici). Roe has stated that

9 L. Freedman, op. cit. p. 22.
10 C.f. Workshop Report on great Powers after the Bush Presidency: Interests, Strategies and Narratives, ISA Annual Convention, New York 2009. See also Miskimmon A., O’Loughlin B., Roselle L., “Forging the World, Strategic Narratives and International Relations”, a working paper presenting their research agenda on how states influence through “strategic narratives seen as a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of international politics”. The authors present a panel at the 2012 ISA Convention in San Diego called “Different Events, Same Story? Strategic Narratives and International Crisis”.
the narratives are not only like scenarios, but can also take the form of arguments, with premises and conclusions.\textsuperscript{12}

- A narrative must call upon emotions and must have an emotional progression. Narratives bring not only “coherence and logic” but also carry on an “emotional dimension” (Radaelli, 2010, Freedman, 2006, Vinson and McDonnell), Morrill, 2010). A narrative must touch both reason and imagination, both the mind and the emotions.

- A specific narrative should be embedded in scenarios people are familiar with, such as moments “that have become part of the collective consciousness of a people”, in other words, history or culture. Vinson and McDonnell have analyzed how the narratives on the war on terror make resonance between the 9/11 attacks and the “prototypical narratives of the society”. “To be persuasive, a particular war narrative must also resonate with prototypical or archetypal themes”. “The military solution proposed by the September 11 war narrative depends for its dramatic force upon many war narratives which have preceded it, and of which it is the most recent chapter”\textsuperscript{13}. The authors take note that there was no storyline about the war on terror before 9/11 even though the U.S. had known terrorist attacks before\textsuperscript{14}. They analyze the process implemented to tie the specific narrative on the war on terror to other types of war narratives that have been generated by the American and Australian governments in previous conflicts. Islamic terrorism has been transformed in 24 hours into an evil league of enemy powers, elevating the significance of war by linking it to the past mission of defeating the evils of Nazism. “The war could now be given a commanding meaning equal to the mythic claim of WWII itself”. So, narratives connect the rationales used in a specific debate to larger cultural and historical concerns that everybody can understand.

- To be successful, narratives must offer a simplified version of a complex situation. Policy narrative often resist change even in the presence of contradicting empirical data because they stabilize the assumptions for decision making in the face of high uncertainty, complexity and polarization\textsuperscript{15}. Very often, narratives can persist even if their validity is questioned just because they simplify complex processes. That is why a policy narrative often gains a status of conventional wisdom in the field of the policy in which it is developed.

Considering that narratives provide a story that offers an explanation when people need to make sense of an event by answering a question, the question to answer when

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{12} Emery Roe (1994) page 3.
\textsuperscript{13} Vinson and McDonnell.
\textsuperscript{14} See also Callahan K. (2006) page 554.
\textsuperscript{15} Roe, 1994, p. 3.
\end{footnotesize}
studying narratives on the war in Afghanistan appears to be: “how did it happen that France is at war in Afghanistan?” and more recently “Why are French troops staying there even though the objectives seem so hard to achieve?”. When political leaders decide a military intervention, and in France, the decision-maker is the President himself, alone and unchallenged, they know that they will have to communicate on the reasons why they made the decision; they will have to give the motive, with whom we are and against whom. The second part of the paper focuses on those questions.

-2- Narratives on the French Intervention in Afghanistan

2.1. The Institutional Background: a Positive Context for Narratives

A few elements characterizing the institutional and political background in France have to be reminded to better understand the observations formulated below on the narratives. First, two features concerning the actors of defense arena in France must be taken into account when analyzing narratives developed by the ruling political leaders:

1) The first characteristic is the prevailing role of the executive branch and the lack of power of the French Parliament as concerns the armed forces control and especially in time off military interventions up to a recent constitutional reform\(^\text{16}\). In France, foreign and security policies are what is called a “domaine réservé” meaning a presidential privilege. The centralization of the decision-making process is greater in foreign and defense policies than in other public policy areas. Since a 2008 reform the French Parliament has to vote the continuation of a military operation within a four months time period after a decision to send troops in intervention. The first and unique vote about Afghanistan took place in September 2008 after a debate on the reasons of the war. This leads to a concentration of the stakeholders in the “storytelling” process into the hands of the President shared or not with the Minister of Defense depending on circumstances and individuals.

2) The second characteristic is the political consensus on defense between Left and Right political parties, especially in the periods of political \(\text{cohabitation}\)\(^\text{17}\) such as in 2001 between President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin who had to manage together the 9/11 aftermath. Consensus on defense is a French typical mark of the Fifth Republic (1958). Up to a very recent period, and notwithstanding some controversial

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\(^{16}\) France is usually considered as a presidential regime, which is not totally right. Originally, the French political regime is a parliamentary one, considering that the parliament can dismiss the executive branch. The government is responsible before the parliament, which is a characteristic of a parliamentary regime. But the presidential power is strong. That makes the French regime a hybrid one.

\(^{17}\) There is cohabitation when the majority in Parliament and the President do not belong to the same party or coalition. The President, chief of the armed forces together with the Prime Minister responsible before the representatives, opposed politically, must rule the country together.
episodes, the political consensus among elites was high concerning the French military intervention in ISAF. As narratives are concerned, the consensus means that there is no counter-narrative to challenge.

These two interacting characteristics - the concentration of the narratives building process at the presidential level and the consensus on defense matters denying counter-narratives- should have made the war narrative easier to build, consolidate and diffuse.

In addition, the French people have a high perception of terrorist threat due to the experience of international terrorism France had since the mid Eighties\(^\text{18}\). Public opinion is highly aware of a potential terrorist threat on homeland territory. In such a context one could expect the attitude of the French towards the war in Afghanistan to be very supportive and so it was until 2008. The hypothesis is that the support could have probably remained longer with more accurate narratives.

At last, the French participation in ISAF intervention had two other major resources for gaining a decisive public support: the operation was considered as legitimate, first because in general, French public grants military interventions abroad with a high degree of approval and the fact is significant considering that France sends 13 000 troops in intervention abroad each year: in 2008, a poll comparing the support for all French deployments gave 68 percent of French supporting military deployment in Kosovo, 67 percent in favor of the operations in Lebanon and Chad, 64 percent backing the Ivory Coast deployment and 62 percent in favor of the mission in Afghanistan, knowing that the support for this latter was already on the decline. The second asset giving legitimacy is the fact that the United Nations resolutions had provided an entire legality to the operation.

In spite of all these positive prerequisites the political rulers have failed to perpetuate narratives in line with the events on the ground enable to keep the public support from dropping, such as it happened in some other countries participating to ISAF like the UK or Denmark as explored by Ringsmose and Borgesen\(^\text{19}\).

As concerns methodology my analysis as regards the official narratives is founded on public statements (foreign policy speeches, addresses in honor of the dead soldiers, press conferences and news releases). Parliamentary public reports and media releases have been used to study the opponents’ narratives. A media database collecting material from five


\(^{19}\) Ringsmose J., Borgesen B.K. “Shaping Public Attitudes Towards the Deployment of Military Power: NATO, Afghanistan and the Use of Strategic Narratives”,
national daily newspapers covering a large political spectrum has been created, containing 2156 media press releases from five national newspapers covering the political spectrum in a period between 2001 and 2011\textsuperscript{20}.

\section*{2.2. Public Support to the War: the Main Steps of Decline}

The long lasting presence of the NATO troops in Afghanistan, when referred to its French dimension and namely to its perception by the French public, can be split into three periods of time: 2001-2006, 2007-august 2008, and 2009-end of 2011. The most recent developments of 2012 are not included in this paper.

1) At the beginning of the Enduring Freedom Operation, in October 2001, nearly 60 percent of the French were in favor of the intervention and only 32 percent were opposed, this latter proportion corresponding to the rate of opponents to any kind of military action usually observed. Then, as ISAF started its mission, public opinion’s support was still very high.

Until 2003, the NATO troops were mostly concentrated in Kabul and its surroundings. Between 2003 and 2006, ISAF expanded its missions to all parts of the Afghan territory intensifying the clashes with the insurgents. When the U.S. launched the war in Iraq which was a very contentious issue in France, a large majority of people and elite being opposed to the war, what was going on in Afghanistan was much less commented in the media than the war in Iraq, and during the years of the expend of ISAF troops all over the Afghan territory the number of official statements and the media coverage about Afghanistan were low. The influence of the war in Iraq on the perception of the conflict in Afghanistan has been misperceived at that moment but it had an extremely negative impact on the views of the U.S. leadership amongst French people and affected for long their attitude on military interventions in which the U.S. were involved.

Between 2002 and 2005, in the first years following the fall of the Taliban’s regime, the Afghan population’s support to the coalition was high. At the end of that phase, in July 2007, 55 percent of the French were still supporting the French participation in the ISAF mission.

2) 2006 - beginning of 2008

This period of time is important although very few military events have occurred in Afghanistan from a French perspective. NATO troops had expanded through the Afghan territory and violence kept increasing day after day since 2006. But, because the French

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\textsuperscript{20} The French newspapers are: Le Monde, Libération, le Figaro, les Échos, Aujourd’hui en France.
contingent was stationed in Kabul, the casualty toll had not been high enough to provoke questions on the nature of the incidents occurring in Afghanistan.

In the beginning of 2008 the public support started to turn down more as the consequence of the decision of President Sarkozy to reintegrate NATO military command structures announced since 2007, than as the result of what was happening on the ground. But this drop has not been noticed compared to the political decision that engendered it, very contentious among political elites, media and part of the public. Indeed even if that reintegation had no real military impact, French military being already present in most of NATO’s structures, the decision had a political impact in connecting the conflict to broadest stakes and allowing to criticize the presidential attitude as being an excessively pro-American one. The opposition qualifying the reintegation as being a renouncement passed a motion of censure that obtained only 277 votes out of 574.

Another event, closely connected to this one, at least in the public mind, reinforced the idea of a dependency towards the U.S., when president Sarkozy announced that he would send 700 troops as required by NATO and especially by the Canadians who were more and more convinced that they were paying a much too high toll of casualties in the war in Afghanistan compared to other NATO contributors.

3) In August 2008, an event precipitated the reversal in public opinion attitude: ten soldiers were killed and 23 wounded while falling into a Taliban’s ambush in Uzbin, district of Surobi, fifty kilometers North East of Kabul. France had just taken the lead of the Surobi district following Italy and this sector was considered as a quite stabilized one by the ISAF command. Through this dramatic event -the highest toll ever known since the bombing in Lebanon in 1983 that caused 58 military fatalities- the French realized that something was happening three thousand miles away from their borders, which had much to do with a war even if it had never been called so before. Media started to express doubts about what French troops were exactly doing in Afghanistan. More and more concern appeared about those French soldiers killed in a conflict, which was not “of our concern”.

The decline of the public support persisted. In August 2009, 64 percent of the French were against the French participation in ISAF and only 36 percent were in favor, the exact opposite of the 2001 figures. In July 2010, 70 percent of the French were opposed to the French military intervention in Afghanistan. In August 2011, 76 percent of those polled were
opposed to the French intervention and in favor of a withdrawal before 2014\textsuperscript{21}. Considering the military situation, at the end of 2008, 84 percent declared that the situation was bad and that the troops were in a vulnerable position. In February 2011, 92\% shared this pessimistic perception of the situation on the ground. Also, in August 2008, 74 percent considered that the risk of getting caught down into a quagmire in Afghanistan was severe, the percent rose to 86\% in August 2009 and to 88\% in February 2011.

In another poll assessing the public perception of the political improvements in the country, 42 percent agreed that the presence of French armed forces in Afghanistan allowed the country to progress towards democracy in August 2009. They were 35\% in 2011.

Regarding the fight against terrorism, the percentage of French thinking that the French military involvement in Afghanistan was necessary to fight international terrorism dropped from 66 percent in April 2008, to 50 percent in August 2009 and 44 percent in February 2011. According to another poll in 2009, only 36 percent believed that the French troops were deployed to fight against terrorism, underlining how the goal had lost its sense.

In August 2011, 75\% of French were opposed to the war and for the first time, even a majority of the Ump’s supporters (President Sarkozy Party, right wing) joined the opponents to the war. In the recent months, and mainly because 2011 has been worst year for the French troops in terms of fatalities, the debate shifted on the timetable of the withdrawal,

Such a drop has been observed in most of NATO participating nations. But one could expect that French public opinion would resist better than others because of the conditions enlightened above. The decrease of the support highlights the fact that a mission that had a high legitimacy and a high support has not been able to maintain those benefits. How can we explain this? Either people were not convinced anymore that the French troops participating in ISAF were able to fight against terrorism in this country, either they thought that what was ongoing in Afghanistan did not have any impact on the French national interests, thus delegitimizing the French participation to ISAF, based on the idea that the insecure situation in Afghanistan was threatening our interests and our values in France, either both. In any case, the justification of the intervention had failed to bring a renewed support to the operation. This decline in the support to the war challenges above all the narratives on war, emphasizing that the legitimacy of a military intervention depends less on its political accuracy than on the way the public perceives accuracy.

\textsuperscript{21} The results of these IFOP polls are to be found on http://www.ifop.com/?option=com_publication&type=poll&id=1597
This drop is questioning the way the intervention has been justified not only at its beginning but through time leading us to the narratives that have been crafted (or failed to be crafted) during these ten years of war.

2.3. The Narratives Weaknesses Facing the Uncertainty of War

Analyzing the rationales assigned to the war in Afghanistan points out the numerous barriers that have made adequate narratives so uneasy to craft. Four of them have heavily weighed: a first one is related to the mission and its goals; a second one is connected to how one measures the improvements on the ground especially in the case of a war among population; the third one is a question of rhetoric and has to do with how the political leaders and the observers talk about the war and the last one raises up the question of multilateral forces facing national needs of justification.

2.3.1. Double Mission, Moving Goals and Untouched Narratives

When the intervention started in 2001, President Chirac’s narratives were those of other participating countries and the statements on the French intervention in Afghanistan mentioned that first the war was launched to catch terrorists and to remove the Taliban regime that had hosted them and second, that the allied forces were staying to help securing the zone. The operation met the need to defend international security threaten by Islamist terrorism and the needs of Afghan population to live in a stable, democratic country. This narrative has been quite effective in the first years of the intervention although already bearing ambiguity but in a context where media were focused on the war in Iraq the Afghan situation appeared as positive. There was no noticeable opposition to the intervention.

Then during 2007 and the beginning of 2008, the clashes between the NATO troops and the insurgents amplified, revealing what appeared as a contradiction for the public: if the Taliban were acting again whereas they were supposed to have been eradicated, then the war against terrorism was not as efficient as told. The first goal was thus questioned. Second, when the Afghan population began considering the coalition forces as an occupation army and started to support the insurgents, the initial military strategy showed its limits. There were no more the Taliban insurgents on the one hand and the population on the other. That crucial change has not been taken into account by the French political elites in charge of the narratives justifying the military intervention. The narratives continued to be identical as they were: “France was engaged in NATO mission for peace and security”, “France was strongly decided to support Afghan population”, “France is acting in ISAF, mandated by United Nations to stabilize the country”. Stabilization, acting for peace, developing the country,
solidarity with Afghan people and Afghan authorities, United Nations mandate, those are the words that were mostly used by the executive branch to craft the war narratives.

From that moment the counter-narratives emerged, far more reactive than the narratives themselves, voicing rationales selected in a large spectrum of political and military grounds such as past French military interventions, in comparing the war in Afghanistan with the deeply traumatic French military intervention in Algeria, Afghan history, mentioning that a military victory was impossible in Afghanistan as history has shown or NATO troops considered as occupation troops, critics on the ISAF absence of strategy and geopolitical French stakes: France has no interests in Afghanistan and the presence of French troops is harmful for the image of France in the Muslim countries.

Undoubtedly, the justification of the war in Afghanistan presented a tough challenge for crafting the narratives: two missions, with multiple and somewhat inconsistent goals proved to be quite inadequate when the casualties amount began to increase and when the media started to report on the daily violent incidents the ISAF forces were confronted to. People in France started to realize that the goals announced were not going to be easily achieved and began to believe that the efforts were somewhat vain. This lack of consistency between narratives and facts emphasizes how difficult it is for political leaders to adapt narratives without recognizing that something went wrong and that the NATO nations were mistaken with their previous goals and strategy. Instead, the narratives did not move and remained anchored in the same repertoire.

2.3.2. Fails in Measuring and Reporting Achievements on the Ground

The importance of perceived success or at least of perceived improvement on the ground is essential to maintain public support especially when the toll of casualties rises. The war in Afghanistan was presented as a war against terrorism and as an operation bringing security to Afghan population after the fall of the Taliban regime. In the first years of ISAF intervention, progress could be easily measured by its positive effects on human rights and terrorism. It was quite easy to report by visible and quantified means: girls were going back to school, Taliban were captured etc. After 7 years of ISAF presence, neither the first nor the second goals were perceived as having known a significant progress such as one could expect, since Ben Laden was still in life (until May 2011) and since the population was not

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22 Michel Goya has pointed that the intervention in Afghanistan is the first case with two missions (ISAF and OEF) and a unique command (NATO and inside NATO, the U.S.), on the same territory (Goya, 2011).
expressing an unwavering support to ISAF troops and their presumed improvement brought to the every day life.

Under that condition, the increasing amount of military casualties reinforced the skepticism and its impact on the support for war. It is not easy as a French citizen to be convinced that the situation is improving when in the same time more and more soldiers are returning back home inside coffins. Casualties do not mean that there is no progress accomplished, they just suggest that success or progress cannot be easily perceived, without an appropriate justification. French troops were facing proportionally more and more casualties each year and the media did not report much on what was improving in the country, neither in terms of security, neither, or rarely in terms of standards of living.

The other side of the mission - bringing security to the Afghan population - should have appeared as having known significant steps forward but as the media reported essentially on military casualties and insurgency’s attacks, people did not perceive it for what it really was. The military, the unique actors having a real perception of improving the local situation step by step, were not visible enough in the media.

The decline of domestic public support can be very damaging for civil-military relations in the long term. That is the reason why the narratives developed by the political leaders are of extreme importance. Narratives are more needed when things get tough, than when everything goes smooth. In the case of the war in Afghanistan, the combination of lack of perceived success with a growing number of fatalities challenged the narrative that did not fit with the rising complexity of the situation.

2.3.3. A War Hiding its Name

When the French troops were sent to Afghanistan, no one was talking about a war, and while the U.S. launched the GWOT, in France, the fight against terrorism has never turned out to be a war. As time went by, the ISAF mission with troops supposed to be deployed for reconstruction missions and training of the Afghan military, meaning low risk ones, became more and more warlike. But French political leaders still avoided calling the Afghanistan conflict a war, until the end of 2008. It was the case with Jacques Chirac and it was also the case with Nicolas Sarkozy at the beginning of his presidential mandate, even with a different and more supportive attitude towards the U.S. Many military came to talk about a French denial of the war. The question is more complex because in fact, the ISAF mission was not a war. It became one only because the Taliban were reconquering more and more territory and because the boundary between insurgents and population was not stable.
This denial in the naming of the intervention appeared to have an impact on the understanding of French military casualties. In August 2008, when French troops fell in an ambush and 10 soldiers died, French public all of a sudden realized that something was wrong. The mission was officially presented as a stabilization mission providing security to the population but then, the amount of casualties was not fitting with the goals and the means of such a mission. People were just unprepared because no political leader had told publically that things had changed in the past years and that the intervention had to be renamed as being a war.

The support dropped after that event, because the facts were not consistent with the rhetoric. A bit later, the French Ministry of Defense launched a communication campaign in the media in June 2009. It was aimed to recall that the French troops were in Afghanistan because the world had changed, that our borders did not need to be defended anymore, but that the threats were beyond them. The French military had to be sent so far to defend peace, values and security. The attitude towards war is probably more a political refusal due to the French leaders shyness than a global French attitude supposedly avoiding war and violence.

2.3.4. Nation Level Narratives in Coalition Forces: a Tough Challenge

ISAF is a coalition force and as such it has been positively identified in the beginning for the reason that multilateral military actions are commonly better accepted in France, giving more legitimacy and allowing sharing the burden. However, in the case of the French involvement in ISAF, a combined difficulty emerged in 2008 that had not find solution with time. In the beginning of 2008 President Sarkozy decided the full reintegration of France into NATO's integrated military structure and this decision was very much disputed by the leaders from the opposition.

In the aftermath of the Uzbin ambush the President stated that France was resolve to carry on the fight against terrorism for democracy and liberty. It was the storyline of the narrative. From that moment, he opponents to the war portrayed the war as being driven only by the wish of President Sarkozy to ingratiate himself with the Americans rather than by a clear conception of France national interest. The French attitude towards legitimacy of the use of force is highly positive and French can support tough military action and casualties “but they are less likely to do so if they feel the engagement is designed to serve the interests of other nations and especially if the other nation are the United States” (Miller, 2010).

So, because the narratives failed to explain the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan, the number of French wondering why France had sent troops in an operation perceived as costly in human lives, in a country where our strategic interests were not
threatened gained in number. For part of people opposed to the reintegration of France in NATO, this war did only serve the U.S. interests. The benefits drawn from multilateralism to get a higher legitimacy have generated problems for narrative building.

**Conclusion**

The fact that information is available on the Internet from all over the world allowing each citizen to make its own opinion is not a sufficient reason to avoid providing appropriate narratives on matters such as military interventions and this task is devoted to the political elite.

The fact that the NATO nations fight more and more inside coalitions forces do not prevent from the importance of building narratives that have to be appropriate to the national frame. Narratives are nation centered and cannot be global, even in a multinational operation with allies combating the same war. Publics from nations involved in the same military intervention, facing the same proportional amount of casualties have been more or less resilient to the trend of disaffection that has grown since 2008.

A comparison including France to the extremely fruitful study made by Jens Ringsmose and Berit Kaja Borgesen on war narratives in four countries participating to ISAF (UK, Canada, Denmark and the Netherland) would be the next step in this study.

**References**


