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

Barbara Jankowski

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How do we explain public support for a war? Recently, the focus on narratives has extended the scope of political science research on the perception of military interventions in public opinion. This paper seeks out the narratives developed on the war in Afghanistan and the role they have played in the support for the war in France. Recent studies have emphasized how narrative impacts on people's willingness to support war and can prevent public disaffection in case of casualties or mission failure. Public leaders cannot avoid providing appropriate narratives when launching a war. The first part of the paper examines the definitions of the concept of narratives, their usage in different subfields of policy studies and why narratives are a valuable notion for the understanding of the perception of war. The second part aims at scrutinizing the narratives on the war in Afghanistan as they have been developed in France by policy-makers, opponents, and the media. In the French case, public support for the military mission in Afghanistan might have been eroded by the weaknesses of the official war narrative as well as by compelling counter-narratives.

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ABSTRACT

How do we explain public support for a war? Recently, the focus on narratives has extended the scope of political science research on the perception of military interventions in public opinion. This paper seeks out the narratives developed on the war in Afghanistan and the role they have played in the support for the war in France. Recent studies have emphasized how narrative impacts on people's willingness to support war and can prevent public disaffection in case of casualties or mission failure. Public leaders cannot avoid providing appropriate narratives when launching a war. The first part of the paper examines the definitions of the concept of narratives, their usage in different subfields of policy studies and why narratives are a valuable notion for the understanding of the perception of war. The second part aims at scrutinizing the narratives on the war in Afghanistan as they have been developed in France by policy-makers, opponents, and the media. In the French case, public support for the military mission in Afghanistan might have been eroded by the weaknesses of the official war narrative as well as by compelling counter-narratives.

SYNTHÈSE

Comment expliquons-nous le soutien de l'opinion publique à une intervention militaire ? Récemment, l'accent mis sur l'analyse des récits (narratives) a donné une nouvelle dimension à la recherche en science politique sur la perception de la guerre par l'opinion publique. De récentes études ont souligné l'impact des récits sur le soutien notamment parce qu'ils peuvent empêcher la désaffection du public en cas de pertes ou d'échec de la mission. Ainsi, les responsables publics ne peuvent éviter de fournir des récits appropriés quand ils lancent une opération. Cet article analyse les récits développés pour justifier la guerre en Afghanistan et le rôle qu'ils ont joué dans le soutien à la guerre en France. La première partie du document examine les définitions données au concept de récits, leur utilisation dans différents sous-domaines d'études et pourquoi les récits sont devenus une notion précieuse pour la compréhension de la perception de la guerre. La deuxième partie examine les récits sur la guerre en Afghanistan, Dans le cas français, le soutien à la mission militaire en Afghanistan aurait été érodé par les faiblesses du récit de guerre officiel ainsi que par des contre-récits plus convaincants.

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■ INTRODUCTION

There is no predictable impact of public reaction on foreign affairs policies, but most likely not a single decision-maker would declare that foreign policy decisions could be taken without considering the public's way of thinking¹. As Jon Western (2007, p. 107) stressed 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". However, once this assertion made, the most important remains to be explained: how is public support for a military intervention built and how does it develop as time goes by?

Social scientists have successively focused on different factors to explain public support for a war. First, they have underlined the role of justification of the mission (e.g. response to a national threat, humanitarian aid, state building), second, they have called attention to the objectives of the military operation, third, they emphasized the legitimacy of the intervention, through a United Nations vote for example, and lastly they have insisted on the need for noticeable success perceived by the public in relation to the goals that had been previously defined. After decades of research, it is absolutely certain that there is not a unique cause explaining the increasing unpopularity of a military intervention. The public disenchantment is a phenomenon induced by several factors interacting with each other.

After the Vietnam War, a majority of decision-makers was convinced that the American people would support future military operations only if it could be ensured that they would not cause military casualties. This perception called "casualties aversion" was shared by the media, scholars, U.S. allies as well as U.S. enemies. It is reported that Saddam Hussein used to be ironic about the credibility of a threat coming from a nation that could not support thousands of fatalities. This phobia, if it came to be proved, would constitute an Achilles' heel for the military.

That is the reason why scholars decided to reexamine the "evidence" that was based on a long set of studies conducted by academics such as John Mueller, the first one to assert a causality between casualties and public support (Mueller, 1973), followed by the Rand study on the influence of casualties on presidential popularity (Lorell, Kelley and Hensler, 1985).

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 Wars in Vietnam and Korea. Larson reconsidered the figures in 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, people would support casualties (Larson, 1996, p.126).

Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler were the first authors to criticize the idea of casualty aversion. By studying the intervention in Somalia and later the war in Iraq, they demonstrated that it was a myth. Their research on the influence of casualties on public support was the first empirical and in real-time research ever done. Their findings emphasized that the prospect of success was a key variable and that people were not casualty phobic but defeat-phobic (Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler, 2009).

Berinsky's book that analyzes the impact of elite positions on individual responses has reopened the debate (Berinsky, 2009). which is still sharp and sustained by numerous articles in academic journals such as Public Opinion Quarterly and the Journal of Conflict Resolution between John Mueller, Peter Feaver, Christopher Gelpi, Adam Berinsky and others.

To summarize the main points of the findings, the attention has long focused on the role of military casualties, but a set of studies conducted over the past decade have assessed that public support does not only

¹ A first draft of this paper was presented at ISA 2012 Convention in San Diego, 1-4 April 2012, in the panel entitled "Communicating War in the Information Age". Many thanks to Dr. Mark A. Genest from the Strategy and Policy Department, US Navy and President of the panel for his comments. Many thanks also to Frédéric Ramel, Professor of political science and scientific director of IRSEM for encouraging me with his suggestions and to Sophia Becker for editing the paper.

decline because of an increase in military casualties, but because people don't believe in the success of the military operation anymore or (and) because they are not sure about the legitimacy of the previously announced goals, together with an increasing amount of fatalities. It is only under these conditions that sensitivity to casualties appears to be significant. One could add that if sensitivity to casualties is perceived, it enlightens the fact that something went wrong in the intervention and that the information people receive are not congruent with the prospects of what would potentially happen. To a certain extent, reactions to casualties can bring to light problems in the course of the intervention.

More recently, the focus on narratives has extended the scope of research in political science 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 identity as narratives are found to be "primary means by which individuals organize, process and convey information" (Jones and McBeth, 2010, p. 330). 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 different definitions of the concept of narratives, 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 as they have been developed in France by policy-makers, opponents, and the media.

■ NARRATIVES: DEFINITION AND USE

1.1. Definition

The concept of narratives is considered an “umbrella” concept coming from philosophy and literary theory using “word-based approaches” in which narratives are stories that link together events “in time and space” and represent a way of making sense of the world” (Yanov, 2007; Bottici, 2010). Narratives are generally seen as stories that are told to explain how things happen by creating links between events. In that way, a narrative is seen as “a persuasive story that weaves events into an intelligible whole” (Vinson, McDonnell, n.d.). Jones and McBeth (2010, p. 329) proposed a definition synthesizing the different contributions of scholars working on the issue since the Nineties: “A narrative is a story with a temporal sequence of events (McComas and Shanahan, 1999) unfolding in a plot (Abel, 2004; Sommers, 1992) that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters (McBeth, Shanahan and Jones, 2005) that culminates in a moral to the story (Verweij et al., 2006) .

In their review of literature they stress the fact that narratives must present a sequence of events tied together by a plot and culminating in a “moral to the story”.

To sum up and give the operating definition for the purpose, a narrative is a story, with temporal sequences of events that offers an explanation 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.

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, p. 7). Policy narratives are also different from policy framing, in the sense that framing refers to the process of defining policy problems and specifically what is included and excluded from the issue that the policy is working on (Sutton, 1999, p. 14).

1.2. Narratives in Policy Analysis

Although in disciplines as history or literature, narratives have been at the heart of the matter for a long time, policy analysis has only recently put light on them. 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 the public to form an opinion on a topic. Narratives help to make actions and policies acceptable that normally would not easily gain public support. They help the public to adopt an attitude towards the issue the policy is expected to handle. As persuasive stories, narratives make actions or policies acceptable that the public people would normally be reluctant to support.

Roe (1994) is the scholar whose work is the most quoted by political scientists as being the first one having applied a narrative analysis to understand policy processes: he made use of a narrative approach, as they were commonly applied in literary theory, to study science controversies. 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 the analysis of non-controversial policies, especially when he stresses the best way to undermine a policy narrative by producing a counter narrative instead of criticizing it (Roe, 1994).

Hajer (2008) and Laws (2008) gave a comprehensive approach of how public policy has developed by importing concepts that try to take complexity and uncertainty through the process of ordering into consideration. Their idea to relate narratives in politics and policy analysis to the dynamic of ordering and constructing a shared meaning is noteworthy.

Coelmont (2012) examined why the European security project had lost a lot of its attraction in the past years. He referred to the failure of the first narrative: “no more war between European countries” and underscored that this narrative was not attractive anymore for Europeans and hence pointed towards the need to build a fresh one.

In recent 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 debates (Boswell, Geddes and Scholten, 2011; McBeth, et al., 2007; Shanahan, Jones and McBeth, 2011; Shanahan, McBeth and Hathaway, 2011). To conclude this short overview, a few words about the use of narratives in the French policy analysis literature: though public policy analysis has known a large expansion since the Eighties, no paper focused on narratives in political science journals, with the exception of Radaelli (2000), whose article is surprisingly lonesome compared to the Anglo-Saxon profusion.

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

1.3. Strategic Narratives and War Narratives

Strategic narratives are state level narratives, designed to influence other states' foreign policies. The concept was introduced to a larger public through Freedman's article in 2006. He stated that the strategic attribute derives from the fact that strategic narratives are constructed deliberately “out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current” and that they are “nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others” (Freedman 2006, p. 22). Those narratives are strategic not only because they focus on a new field of public policy -security and foreign policies- but also because they propose another step in the definition, emphasizing 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 other disciplines such as political communication, bringing together scholars who intended to bridge communication studies and international relations (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2012).

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 populations. Using narratives to explore our understanding of public support to war is a recent trend in research with a majority of the scholarly literature focusing on the war on terror, like Callahan (2006) and Western (2010) who have studied the war on terror narratives or Vinson and McDonnell (n.d.) who compared the 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 power. To complete these conditions, narratives must fulfill a number of criteria:

- Overall, narratives are processes of story telling: a narrative presupposes someone who “tells” the story and an audience both of which define the meaning of the story.

- Narrative accounts have beginnings, middle-parts and ends tied together by a plot (Yanov, 2007, p. 587), (Jones and McBeth, 2010, p. 340). A narrative must move forward, with a conclusion to the events. “Narratives provide meanings because they contain a trajectory” (Bottici, 2010, p. 920). Roe has stated that the narratives are not only like scenarios, but can also take the form of arguments, with premises and conclusions (Roe, 1994, p. 3).

- A narrative must call upon emotions and must have an emotional progression. Narratives bring not only “coherence and logic” but also include an “emotional dimension”. A narrative must touch both reason and

imagination, both the mind and the emotions (Radaelli, 2010; Freedman, 2006; Vinson and McDonnell n.d.; Morrill, 2010).

- 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. The challenge with the war on terror was that despite analogies made with the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, “the decision to enter a state of war after September 11 was a unique event in American history” (Callahan et al. 2006, p. 554). The authors take notice that there was no storyline about the war on terror before 9/11 even though the U.S. had experienced terrorist attacks before.

Vinson and McDonnell (n.d.) analyzed how the narratives on the war on terror create a link between the 9/11 attacks and the “prototypical narratives of the society”. They underline that in order to be persuasive “a particular war narrative must also resonate with prototypical or archetypal themes” (Vinson and McDonnell, n.d.). Thus, “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” (Vinson, McDonnell, n.d.). They examine 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 was transformed within 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” (Vinson, McDonnell, n.d.). Narratives must therefore connect the rationales used in a specific debate with larger cultural and historical concerns to which everybody can relate.

- 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 (Roe, 1994). 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 that needs so be answered when studying narratives on the war in Afghanistan appears to be: “Why did France get involved in a 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 on a military intervention, (and concerning France, the decision-maker is the President himself, alone and unchallenged), they know that they will have to communicate the reasons for their decision. They need to provide a motive, and information about who are the friends and the foes. . The second part of the paper focuses on those questions.

■ NARRATIVES ON THE FRENCH INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN

2.1. The Institutional Background: a Positive Context for Narratives

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

1) The first characteristic is the prevailing role of the executive branch and the lack of power of the French Parliament concerning the control of the armed forces and especially in time of military interventions, up to a recent constitutional reform². In France, foreign and security policy is a so-called “*domaine réservé*” meaning a presidential privilege. The centralization of the decision-making process is greater in foreign and defense policy than in other public policy areas. Since a 2008 reform, the French Parliament has to vote the continuation of a military operation within a period of four months after a decision to send troops in an intervention. The first and only vote on Afghanistan took place in September 2008 after a debate on the reasons of the war. These characteristics show how much the narratives building process is concentrated in the hands of the President who shares it or not with the Prime Minister and 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 cohabitation³ such as in 2001 between President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin who had to manage the 9/11 aftermath together. Consensus on defense is a typical trait of the Fifth Republic born in 1958. Up to a very recent period, and notwithstanding some controversial episodes, the political consensus among elites was high, concerning the French military participation in ISAF. As narratives are concerned, consensus means that there is no counter-narrative to challenge.

These two interacting characteristics - the concentration of the narrative-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 citizens have a high perception of terrorist threat due to the attacks by international terrorists that France had experienced in the mid Eighties and then in the mid Nineties⁴. Since then, public opinion is highly aware of a potential terrorist attack 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 strong with more accurate narratives.

At last, the French participation in the ISAF intervention had another major source of decisive public support which made narratives easy to build: the operation was considered legitimate, first because the United Nations resolutions had provided a legal framework for the operation and secondly because the French public grants military interventions abroad with a high degree of approval in general and the fact is significant considering that France sent up to 13 000 troops per year in interventions abroad during the past decade. In 2008, a poll comparing the support for different French deployments abroad showed that 68 percent of the French supported military deployment to Kosovo, 67 percent were in favor of the operations in Lebanon and Chad, 64 percent backed the Ivory Coast deployment and 62 percent were in favor of the mission in Afghanistan, knowing that the support for the latter was already in the decline.

² France is usually considered a presidential regime, which is not totally correct. 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 and that makes the French regime a hybrid one.

³ 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.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the terrorist threat perception and the experience of international terrorism in France, see B. Jankowski (2011).

In spite of all these positive prerequisites, the political rulers have failed to perpetuate narratives in line with the events on the ground that would have prevented the public support from dropping, as it happened in some other countries participating in ISAF like the UK or Denmark as explored by Ringsmose and Borgesen (2011, p. 508).

Concerning methodology my analysis of the official narratives is founded on public statements (foreign policy speeches, addresses in honor of the dead soldiers, press conferences and news releases). Public parliamentary reports and media releases have been used to study the opponents' narratives. A media database collecting material from five 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 2011⁵.

2.2. Public Support for the War: the Main Steps of the Decline

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

2.2.1. 2001-2006

At the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, in October 2001, nearly 60 percent of the French were in favor of the intervention and only 32 percent were opposed, corresponding to the usual number of opponents to any kind of military action. Then, as ISAF started its mission, public 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 which intensified the clashes with the insurgents. When the U.S. launched the war in Iraq - a very contentious issue in France with a large majority of people and the elite being opposed to the war - Afghanistan was much less commented in the media than the war in Iraq. During the years of the expansion 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. It had an extremely negative impact on the views of the U.S. leadership amongst French people and it affected for long their attitude about military interventions in which the U.S. was involved.

At the end of that phase, in July 2007⁶, 55 percent of the French were still supporting the French participation in the ISAF mission. Between 2002 and 2005, the first years following the fall of the Taliban regime, the Afghan population supported the coalition as well.

2.2.2. 2006 - Mid 2008

This period of time is important although very few military events have occurred in Afghanistan from a French perspective. NATO troops had been expanded over the Afghan territory and violence kept increasing day by day since 2006. But, because the French contingent was stationed in Kabul, the casualty toll had not been high enough to provoke questions on the nature of the events occurring in Afghanistan.

The downturn in public support beginning of 2008 can be seen as a consequence of President Sarkozy's decision to reintegrate NATO military command structures which had been announced in 2007, rather than a reaction to what was happening on the ground. Compared to the decision that triggered it, the drop in public support has hardly been noticed. The reintegration was very contentious among political elites, the media and part of the public. Indeed, even if the reintegration had no military impact, the decision had political repercussions as the French military was already present in most of NATO's structures. It connected the conflict to broader stakes (was the

⁵The French newspapers are: le Monde, daily, centre-left, could be compared to the NYT, Libération, daily, initially far left, nowadays, centre-left, le Figaro, daily, conservative; les Échos, daily, financial, Aujourd'hui en France, daily, same kind of readership as the Daily Mail.

⁶No data available for 2006

President right or wrong to reintegrate NATO?) and criticized the presidential attitude for being excessively pro-American. The opposition qualified the reintegration into NATO as a renouncement of French autonomy and passed a motion of censure that obtained 277 votes out of 574.

Another event, closely connected to this one, at least into in the public consciousness mind, reinforced the idea of a dependency on the U.S.: president Sarkozy announced that he would send 700 more troops, a request by NATO and especially by the Canadians who were more and more convinced that they were paying a much too higher toll of casualties in the war in Afghanistan compared to other NATO contributors⁷.

2.2.3. August 2008-2011

In August 2008, a tragic event precipitated the reversal in public opinion: ten soldiers were killed and 23 wounded while being ambushed by the Taliban in Uzbun, a district of Surobi, fifty kilometers north-east of Kabul. France had just taken the lead of the Surobi district, replacing following Italy. The sector was considered quite stable by the ISAF command. Through this dramatic event - the highest death toll 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 looked very much like a war even if it had never been called so before. Media started to express doubts about what exactly it was that French troops were doing in Afghanistan. More and more concerns arose about those French soldiers killed in a conflict, which was not "of our concern".

The public support continued to decline. In August 2009, 64 percent of the population were against the French participation in ISAF and only 36 percent of them were in favor, the exact opposite of the 2001 records. In July 2010, 70 percent of the French were opposed to the French military intervention in Afghanistan. One year later, in August 2011, 76 percent of those polled were opposed to the French intervention and in favor of a withdrawal before 2014 (IFOP, 2011). 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 in a quagmire in Afghanistan was severe, the percentage 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, in August 2009, 42 percent agreed that the presence of French armed forces in Afghanistan allowed the country to progress towards democracy. They were no more than 35% to have that opinion 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 to 44 percent in February 2011. According to another poll in 2009, only 36 percent of the population believed that the French troops were deployed to fight against terrorism, which underlined how the initial goal had lost its sense.

In August 2011, 75% of the French were opposed to the war and for the first time, a majority of the Ump's supporters⁸ joined the opponents to the war. This is mainly because 2011 had been the worst year for the French troops in terms of fatalities., Starting in early 2011, the debate shifted to the timetable of troop withdrawal.

Such a fall in public support has been observed in most of the participating nations but one could expect that French public opinion would stand firmer than in other countries because of the conditions enlisted above. The decrease in support highlights a puzzle: a mission which had a high level of legitimacy and was largely supported by the public, has not been able to capitalize on such benefits. How can this conundrum be solved?

⁷The decision was announced at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008.

⁸ UMP was supporting President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Two sorts of explanation can be advanced.

- Either people were not convinced that the French troops participating in ISAF were able to fight against terrorism in this country anymore.
- Or people changed their mind and started to consider that what was going on in Afghanistan did not have any impact on French national interests, which would delegitimize the French participation in ISAF. The insecure situation in Afghanistan would be in fact threatening our interests and our values in France.

In any case, the justification for the intervention had failed to gather renewed support for the military 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 this accuracy.

The fall in the public support questions the manner the intervention has been justified not only at its beginning but over time, leading to the narratives that have been crafted or failed to be crafted during the ten years of war.

2.3. The Narratives Weaknesses Facing the Uncertainty of War

The analysis of the narratives assigned to the war in Afghanistan points out numerous obstacles that have made adequate narratives so difficult to craft. Five impediments weighed heavily:

- 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 refers to rhetoric and namely how political leaders and major observers evoked the war;
- The fourth one concerns the French reintegration of NATO military structure at the same time as the war was getting much less popular;
- The last one raises the question of how national narratives can account for the justification of a multinational forces intervention. Multilateral operations need justifications but as long as narratives are built on a national level they will not be able to meet this need.

2.3.1. Double Mission, Moving Goals but Untouched Narratives

When the intervention started in 2001, President Chirac's narratives were similar to those of other participating countries. First, the statements on the French intervention in Afghanistan mentioned that the war was launched to catch terrorists and to remove the Taliban regime hosting them, The second justification was, that the allied forces were staying to help securing the zone. The operation answered to the need to defend international security threatened by Islamist terrorism and the needs of Afghan population to live in a stable and a democratic country. These narratives have been quite effective in the first years of the intervention even though they already bore some ambiguity. In a context in which the media was focused on the war in Iraq, the Afghan situation appeared as much more positive. Compared to the war in Iraq, there was no noticeable opposition to the intervention in Afghanistan.

Then in 2007 and in the beginning of 2008, clashes between NATO troops and insurgents increased, revealing something that for the public appeared to be a contradiction: if the Taliban were active again, even though they were supposed to be eradicated, then the war against terrorism was apparently not as efficient as told. The first goal was thus questioned. Second, when the Afghan population began seeing the coalition forces as an occupation army and started to support the insurgents, the initial military strategy showed its limits. It was no longer possible to assume

that the Taliban insurgents were on one side and the population on the other. This crucial change has not been taken into account by the French political elites in charge of the narratives justifying the military intervention. The narratives remained identical to the previous ones: “France is engaged in NATO mission for peace and security”, “France is 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 were the key words that were mostly used by the executive branch to craft the war narratives.

In the end of 2008, and after the Taliban ambush in Uzbini, counter-narratives emerged, far more reactive than the narratives themselves, using rationales selected in a large spectrum of political and military grounds such as past French military interventions, comparing the war in Afghanistan with the deeply traumatic French military intervention in Algeria, referring to the history of Afghanistan and mentioning that a military victory was impossible in this country as history has shown.

After the Uzbini ambush the media coverage emphasized the military fatalities by describing the events in the same manner as if they were road deaths. They considered them as victims instead of assuming that they had died for their country and had to be honored. The contents of the media release could be seen as the symptom of the unpreparedness of the media and of the public in general for the sense and implications of the war.

The counter narratives also considered NATO troops as an occupying army, pointed towards the ISAF absence of strategy and finally emphasized the lack of French interests in Afghanistan and the harmful presence of French troops in that country for the image of France in the Muslim world.

Undoubtedly, the justification for the war in Afghanistan represented a tough challenge for those in charge of crafting the narratives. There were two missions, with multiple and somewhat inconsistent goals. Michel Goya (2011) has pointed out that the intervention in Afghanistan was the first case of a military intervention with two missions (ISAF and OEF) and a unique command (NATO and inside NATO, the U.S.), on the same territory. The narratives proved they were quite inadequate when the amount of casualties began to increase and when the media started to report daily about violent incidents the ISAF forces were confronted with. People in France gradually realized that the goals announced were not going to be easily achieved and started to believe that the efforts were somewhat in vain.

This lack of consistency between narratives and facts emphasizes firstly that narratives cannot be disjointed from the facts they are supposed to clarify and secondly how difficult it is for political leaders to adapt narratives. Adapting the story means admitting that the NATO member states were mistaken with their initial goals and strategy. Instead, the narratives did not change and remained anchored in the same repertoire.

2.3.2. Failures in Measuring and Reporting Achievements on the Ground

The importance of perceived success or at least 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 the ISAF intervention, positive effects on human rights and terrorism could easily measure progress. 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 making significant progress as one could expect. Ben Laden was still alive (until May 2011) and the population was not expressing unwavering support to ISAF troops and their presumed improvement brought to everyday life.

Under such conditions, the increasing amount of military casualties reinforced the skepticism and impacted the support of the war. It is not easy as a French citizen to be convinced that the situation is improving when at the same time more and more soldiers are returning back home in coffins. Casualties do not mean that there is no progress accomplished, they just suggest that success or progress cannot be easily perceived, without appropriate justification and explanation why French troops were facing proportionally more and more casualties each year since

2006. The media also did not report much on improvements in the country, neither in terms of security, neither, or rarely in terms of standard of living.

The other side of the mission - bringing security to the Afghan population - should have been shown as having made significant progress. But as the media reported essentially on military casualties and insurgent attacks, people did not see it for what it really was. The only actors who have a realistic perception of the improvement of the local situation, the soldiers themselves, 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 and a growing number of fatalities challenged the narratives that did not fit 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 (Global War on Terror), in France, the intervention was not considered as a war, because in France, fighting against terrorism has never been a war until then. As time went by, the ISAF mission with troops supposedly deployed for low risk reconstruction missions and training of the Afghan military, became more and more warlike. But until the end of 2008, French political leaders still avoided calling the Afghanistan conflict a war. It was the case for Jacques Chirac and it was also the case for Nicolas Sarkozy at the beginning of his presidential mandate, even though he had a different and more supportive attitude towards the U.S. Many military started talking about a French denial of the war.

The issue is however complex because in fact, the ISAF mission was not a war. It became one only because the Taliban were regaining more and more territory and because the limits between insurgents and population were less and less discernible.

Such a refusal to call the intervention a war 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, the 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 the amount of casualties was not fitting the goals and the means of such a mission. People were just unprepared because no political leader had said publicly that things had changed in the past years and that the intervention had to be renamed as being a war.

The support dropped after this event, because the facts were not consistent with the rhetoric. A bit later, in June 2009, the French Ministry of Defense launched a communication campaign in the media⁹. It was aimed at recalling that the French troops were in Afghanistan because the world had changed and if our borders did not need to be defended anymore the threats were beyond them. The French military had to be sent far away to defend peace, values and security. This attitude of war denial is probably more a political refusal due to the shyness of French leaders rather than a general French skepticism towards war and violence.

2.3.4. NATO Reintegration: a Tough Challenge for Narratives

ISAF is a coalition force and as such it has been viewed positively in the beginning. Multilateral military actions are generally better accepted in France because they enhance the legitimacy of the use of force and allow sharing the burden. However, in the case of the French involvement in ISAF, a serious difficulty emerged in 2008 that

⁹ The campaign, entitled « Aujourd'hui, la défense va au-delà des frontières » (Today, defense goes beyond borders) was launched on June 14, 2009 by the Ministry of Defense.

had not find solution with time. In early 2008, President Sarkozy decided on the full reintegration of France into NATO's integrated military structure and this decision was very much disputed by the opposition.

In the aftermath of the Uzbinkh ambush which occurred a few months later, the President stated that France was determined to carry on the fight against terrorism, for the sake of democracy and liberty. It was the storyline of the narrative but the opponents to the war in Afghanistan portrayed it as being driven only by President Sarkozy's wish to ingratiate himself with the Americans rather than to pursue France's national interest (Miller, 2010, p. 104). For the part of people opposed to the full reintegration of France into NATO¹⁰, the war in Afghanistan served first and foremost U.S. interests. This argument permeated public opinion much more effectively than the official narratives.

In general, the French attitude towards the use of armed forces is positive and the French can support tough military action. They are, however, 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 is the United States (Miller, 2010, p. 86). The idea of French independence which feeds anti-Americanism has never disappeared. The benefits drawn from multilateralism to obtain higher legitimacy had generated problems for narrative building, because of the interfering of an event (the reintegration into NATO), which had little to do with the decision to participate in the mission in Afghanistan. So, those opposed to the war suddenly found a major and attractive argument to feed their counter narratives. The opposition to NATO and the apprehension to be influenced by the U.S. interests represented a far more appealing and solid narrative than the official one.

2.3.5. The Need for Nation Level Narratives in Multinational Interventions

The fact that NATO nations fight more and more within coalition forces do not seem to reduce the importance of building appropriate national. Field studies have shown that narratives are still nation centered and cannot be global, even in a multinational operation with allies combating the same war. People 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. This has been emphasized by Ringsmose and Borgesen in their article comparing public support and war narratives in four countries participating in ISAF: UK, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands (Ringsmose, Borgesen, 2011). They have shown how different narratives employed by each member state have impacted the public tolerance facing the military deployment and its costs. This resulted in a strong and lasting support in the U.K. and in Denmark despite a high number of casualties, whereas an increasing opposition in the cases of Canada and of the Netherlands lead to a military withdrawal.

¹⁰ 58% of French were in favor of the integration, and 37% against. The Socialists were mainly opposed (52%). Poll IFOP/Paris Match, 10 March 2009.

■ CONCLUSION

Information about ongoing wars is available on the Internet from all over the world, allowing each citizen to form an own opinion. This is however insufficient since such information does not provide acceptable and appropriate story lines, which are necessary to give sense to the events and to make them tolerable.

The main hypothesis is that, as asserted by L. Freedman, narratives prevent public disaffection in case of casualties or failure. Recent studies have emphasized how narrative impacts on people's willingness to support war and how public leaders cannot avoid providing appropriate narratives when they launch a war.

In the case of France, public support for the military mission in Afghanistan might have been eroded by the weaknesses of the official war narrative as well as by compelling counter-narratives.

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