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The Strategic Defense Initiative and the Logic of Narrative Coercion

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NGÔ DI LÂN, MAY 19 2024

Leaders have long used narratives to shape public perception and mobilize support. For example, in Ukraine the U.S. presents a story of Ukraine as a beacon of democratic resilience in the face of unprovoked Russian aggression, whereas Moscow's narrative casts Russia as a protector of Russian-speaking populations, standing tall against Western hegemony. Yet narratives can also be used to coerce adversaries. Narrative coercion is a potentially powerful yet overlooked form of statecraft, one that relies on the strategic deployment of stories to shape an opponent's calculus and force concessions. One well-known example is US president Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also popularly known as "Star Wars," a bold narrative of space-based missile defense that had a sizable impact on Soviet defense thinking and response in the 1980s. The implication is that the skillful use of narrative coercion can potentially shape outcomes in contemporary conflicts, such as in Ukraine.

Storytelling is fundamental to human cognition and communication. They shape our understanding of the world, give meaning to our experiences and guide our action. Narratives play a particularly crucial role in international relations, as they define the identities, interests, and interactions of state and non-state actors. The concept of a "strategic narrative" refers to the purposeful use of narratives by political actors to achieve specific objectives, such as legitimizing policies, mobilizing support, or influencing the behavior of other actors. Strategic narratives are carefully crafted stories that frame events, issues, and actors in ways that serve the interests of their creators, and they are disseminated through various channels, such as media, diplomatic engagement, and academic discussion.

Narratives can also be utilized for coercive purposes. States may resort to "narrative coercion", that is the strategic use of narrative to pressure, manipulate, or influence target audiences in pursuit of geopolitical objectives. Narrative coercion operates by shaping perceptions, framing events, and defining the contours of a given situation in ways that induce the target to make concessions or otherwise behave in ways that favor the coercer's interests. The "Madman Theory" that the Nixon administration employed to coerce North Vietnam is a case in point. This narrative portrayed President Nixon as an unstable and unpredictable leader who might resort to extreme measures, such as nuclear escalation, if pushed too far. By cultivating this narrative, U.S. leaders sought to coerce North Vietnamese policymakers into making concessions at the negotiating table and end the war on terms favorable to the U.S.

Despite sharing some similarities, narrative coercion is distinct from other forms of coercion, such as economic sanctions or coercive threats. While these tactics rely on the threat or use of force or economic punishment to compel compliance, narrative coercion operates more subtly, by shaping the cognitive and emotional landscape in which decisions are made. Narrative coercion is also different from disinformation campaigns, which seek to deceive or mislead audiences through the spread of false or misleading information. While narrative coercion may involve some elements of selective emphasis or framing, it typically relies on the strategic deployment of narratives that have some basis in reality, rather than outright fabrications. More importantly, those deploying narrative coercion often believe their own narratives whereas those waging disinformation campaign do not.

Like any coercive attempt, narrative coercion is not always successful. Its success likely depends on several factors, such as the credibility of the narrative, the skill and resources of the coercer, and the international situation at the time. To achieve maximum coercive impact, the narrative must be carefully crafted to exploit common cognitive

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biases, as well as specific emotional vulnerabilities, and cultural predispositions of the main target, while also maintaining a degree of consistency with observable facts. This means that the best narratives are backed by actions that reinforce the story being told, creating a feedback loop that enhances the narrative's persuasive power. Doing so will help the narrative appeal to multiple audiences, ensuring that it will be repeated and spread by multiple actors, further enhancing its credibility. More importantly, the coercer must have the means and the will to sustain the narrative over time, to adapt it to changing circumstances and fight against potential counter-narratives.

The intensifying militarization of space in the 1970s set the stage for SDI, as both superpowers had already woven space capabilities into their military and intelligence operations. The détente era's cooperation in space, epitomized by the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz handshake, soon gave way to renewed military competition in space. Reagan's 1983 announcement of the SDI envisioned a new space-based defense system that relies on technologically advanced missile shields. While SDI was presented as a defensive measure designed to protect the United States and its allies from a potential Soviet nuclear attack, its strategic implication was clear: should the U.S. be able to shoot down incoming Soviet ballistic missiles, it could theoretically win a nuclear war, which upends the "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) paradigm that for decades have been the cornerstone of Soviet-American strategic stability. Simultaneously, this narrative was designed to coerce the Soviet Union by exploiting their fears of a potential shift in the strategic balance. The SDI narrative, therefore, represents a clear case of narrative coercion – the strategic deployment of a story to shape perceptions, influence decision-making, and pressure an adversary to change their behavior in ways that favor the coercer's interests.

The SDI was not merely a military program, but also a carefully crafted strategic narrative designed to coerce the Soviet Union by exploiting their fears of a potential shift in the strategic balance. By portraying SDI as a technologically feasible and strategically game-changing initiative, the Reagan administration sought to manipulate Soviet threat perceptions and decision-making calculus. The narrative aimed to convince Soviet leaders that if they did not make concessions in arms control negotiations or change their behavior in other areas of competition, they would risk facing a future in which the U.S. had a significant strategic advantage. This could potentially render the Soviet nuclear deterrent obsolete and leave them vulnerable to U.S. pressure or even military action. The SDI narrative, therefore, represents a clear case of narrative coercion – the strategic deployment of a story to shape perceptions, influence decision-making, and pressure an adversary to change their behavior in ways that favor the coercer's interests.

There is robust historical evidence that Reagan truly believed in the potential of SDI and as one researcher put it, since the moment Reagan announced the program, "they harped on it at every opportunity. Their negotiating positions reflected their fixation, as they persisted in linking arms control talks to constraints on SDI". Gorbachev and the Soviet leadership saw SDI as a clear threat despite the fact that the SDI was still in the early stages of development. Consequently, they approved a series of symmetric and asymmetric responses in the summer of 1985 and linked progress on arms control treaties to constraints on SDI. However, because U.S. policymakers understood Soviet fears of this program, they did not budge on the issue of SDI. Despite the Soviet Union's proposal for a 50 percent cut in strategic offensive weapons, Secretary of State George Shultz warned that President Reagan will not abandon research and testing of his SDI in exchange for progress in the Geneva arms talks.

During the 1986 summit in Reykjavik, disagreements over testing missile defense system components in space was a major focus. Gorbachev proposed that all U.S. and Soviet nuclear weapons could be eliminated if SDI was confined to the laboratory yet Reagan refused to accept any limits on SDI, leading to a stalemate in the negotiations. In February 1987, Gorbachev made the historic decision to delink SDI from progress on negotiations concerning intermediate-range nuclear forces. This decision was motivated, in part, by the realization that the U.S. was unlikely to budge on SDI and that continued linkage would only hinder progress on other important arms control issues. Gorbachev's concession paved the way for the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in December 1987, which led to the elimination of an entire class of U.S. and Soviet ground-based missiles. This was a significant breakthrough in arms control, demonstrating that progress could be made despite ongoing disagreements over SDI or precisely because the U.S. held onto its SDI narrative.

While SDI never materialized as envisioned and was arguably not the key factor that caused the end of the Cold War,

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one should not dismiss its significance. The strategic deployment of the SDI narrative and Reagan's insistence that the ambitious program would work still played a meaningful role in shaping Soviet perceptions and pressuring them to make concessions in arms control negotiations. Notably, the Soviets were not just concerned about a possible American nuclear shield, they also anticipated a new offensive threat from beam weapons that resulted from the SDI program. Because Soviet space agency and other parts of the military played up the SDI threat, their political leaders were scared into bargaining away valuable Soviet military assets in order to get rid of SDI. They also pursued costly countermeasures such as investing heavily in their own strategic defense research and ballistic missiles designed to overcome SDI. This inefficient resource allocation decision, driven in part by the perceived threat of SDI, exacerbated the economic and technological strains that ultimately contributed to the Soviet Union's collapse.

The SDI case demonstrates the power of a compelling strategic narrative to shape an adversary's perceptions and compel it to respond in ways that strain its resources and strategic position, even when the narrative's practical realization remains uncertain. It also highlights the importance of sustaining a narrative over time and adapting it to changing circumstances, as the Reagan administration did in response to evolving Soviet reactions. The lessons from the SDI experience suggest that narrative coercion could be a potentially valuable tool in shaping the endgame of the Ukraine conflict, which has dragged on for over two years, causing immense human suffering and economic devastation for both sides. Since a decisive military victory for either side is unlikely for the foreseeable future, a negotiated settlement still likely holds the best chance to bring this conflict to an end.

Relevant actors should gradually shift the current narrative from a largely Manichean struggle between a freedom-loving democracy and a powerful autocracy toward emphasizing the immense humanitarian costs that the war has incurred and the shared interests of all parties in a peaceful, stable, and prosperous region. Furthermore, this new narrative should underscore the untenable toll of prolonged conflict, the dangers of spillover, as well as the growing risk and catastrophic consequences of nuclear escalation, reinforcing the urgency for a meaningful diplomatic resolution that could safeguard the legitimate interests of both Ukraine and Russia. By virtue of its discursive power, the U.S. should take the lead in promoting this new narrative, yet it should be widely shared and consistently communicated by a broad coalition of international actors, including U.S. allies and regional powers, via multiple channels. These actors should stress their commitment to facilitating a negotiated settlement and their willingness to provide the necessary guarantees and economic support to make such a settlement sustainable. The goal is to convince both Russia and Ukraine that there is a viable and more appealing alternative to war.

By combining a compelling strategic narrative with a carefully calibrated mix of diplomatic pressures and inducements, the international community could create the conditions for a breakthrough in the Ukraine conflict. While the road to peace will undoubtedly be long and difficult, the effective use of narrative coercion, as demonstrated by the SDI experience, could be a critical factor in breaking the current deadlock and setting the stage for a negotiated resolution.

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