



## **THESIS BOOKLET**

**Anna Etl-Nádudvari**

### **What to make of Strategic Narratives in International Relations?**

An Integrated Framework for Strategic Narrative analysis  
and the study of France's protracted military intervention  
in the Sahel

Ph.D Dissertation

Supervisor:

**Zoltán Gálik Ph.D**

Budapest, 2024

**Department of International Relations**

**THESIS BOOKLET**

**Anna Etl-Nádudvari**

**What to Make of Strategic Narratives in International  
Relations?**

An Integrated Framework for Strategic Narrative analysis  
and the Study of France's Protracted Military  
Intervention in the Sahel

Ph.D. Dissertation

**Supervisor:**

**Zoltán Gálik, Ph.D**

Associate Professor

© Anna Etl-Nádudvari

## Table of Contents

I. Research Background and Justification of the Topic ...	4
II. Methodology.....	5
Operationalising the Integrated Framework .....	7
III. Findings and Main Results .....	10
Evaluating Hypotheses .....	10
Main Empirical Results .....	18
IV. Main references .....	21
V. List of Publications .....	22

## I. Research Background and Justification of the Topic

In the past decades, the concept of strategic narrative – ‘compelling storylines, with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events’ (Freedman 2006) – was mainstreamed in connection with contemporary protracted military interventions while it was also used to analyse various phenomena in international relations. Nevertheless, puzzling theoretical frameworks and selective analysis practices led to confusion in the emerging research agenda of strategic narratives. Instead of progressing towards a synthesized and complex use of broader interdisciplinary results, authors mostly tried to come up with findings in separate enclosures. The problem of fuzzy theorizing and the absence of interdisciplinary foundations coupled with the selective use of this term as a label for various types of discourses.

This dissertation argues that a new conceptual framework is needed for strategic narratives as deliberate practices of narrative representations, which is based on interdisciplinary foundations with the synthesis of relevant

theoretical perspectives. Therefore, this dissertation aims to present an Integrated Framework for the concept of strategic narrative, which 1) builds on the synthesis of the literature from a broad, interdisciplinary perspective, combining insights from narrative theories and the hermeneutical cycle, clarifying links between narrative and framing and synthesising theories on the persuasion capacity of strategic narratives; 2) provides a new conceptual and methodological framework for analysis; 3) leads to new empirical results with a case study applying the Integrated Framework on the strategic narrative of France's protracted military intervention in the Sahel region.

## II. Methodology

In a deductive approach, the research identifies key gaps, controversies and potential solutions synthesising interdisciplinary perspectives in the Conceptual Background part, building on problematizing as well as gap-spotting in the literature. Based on these synthesised findings, I propose the *Integrated Framework for Strategic Narrative Analysis*. The foundation of this

Framework is based on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical cycle, and it integrates narratology perspectives (structural narratology, narrative paradigm); framing theories (frame alignment, prospect theory); and theorizing on persuasion from the literature in IR and Security Studies.

To demonstrate the Framework's empirical applicability, it is used on the case study of *France's protracted military intervention in the Sahel with Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane*. Operating with a case study methodology as a research strategy, case selection is conducted with a non-probability sampling method, as homogenous purposive sampling. As a member of both NATO and EU, France has been involved in parallel and continuous foreign military interventions with the largest troop numbers, holding the highest record of military interventions among European states. France's intervention in the Sahel between 2012 and 2022 was its largest deployment since the Algerian War, and in this protracted foreign military intervention, France acted as a hegemon strategic communicator.

## Operationalising the Integrated Framework

Prefiguration analysis highlights aspects of narrative fidelity and desirability. Its key question guiding analysis is: *What preexisting interpretive structures influence the resonance of the audience to the emerging narrative?* Prefiguration analysis identifies and evaluates master narratives, political myths, national role concepts and cognitive priors as influential preexisting interpretive structures. For data collection and data analysis, the research relies on multiple sources as secondary literature and preexisting interpretive structures are further analysed through historical institutionalist concepts of drift and layering, outlining relative position and dynamics of rival structures. As a result of the prefiguration analysis, key interpretive structures and institutional mechanisms can be highlighted as a baseline for follow-up analysis, as contrast material for studying the configuration of strategic narratives.

Configuration analysis is guided by the following questions: *What are key purpose and prospect frames in the narrative? How do purpose frames resonate with*

*interpretive structures identified in the prefiguration stage? To what extent is there consistency and clarity in the semantic configuration of the narrative? How does prospect framing change along the narrative's evolution?*

Configuration analysis is based on a thematic analysis of purpose frames, highlighting specific framing tasks and practices of frame alignment (frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extensions, and frame transformation). Data analysis is conceptually guided: a new analytical framework is created, which highlights diagnostic and prognostic framing tasks as *Threat and Security* frames and motivational framing tasks as *Norm and Value* frames. Framing analysis also extends to identifying key loss and gain frames following the insights of prospect theory's framing effect. Based on results of this purpose and prospect framing analysis, configuration analysis evaluates resonance with preexisting interpretive structures; it assesses consistency and clarity of purpose framing, as well as to what extent expectations on prospect framing are reflected in the narrative. Regarding data collection and scope, configuration analysis relies on secondary data as official primary sources of elite



discourse, examining key pieces of text-based documents consisting of 76 speeches from President Hollande and President Macron along the timeline of France's intervention in the Sahel region, from 2012 to 2022.

Refiguration analysis focuses on how semantic configurations meet reality, looking at factors shaping narrative probability. Here the key questions guiding analysis are: *What factors influence the coherence of narrative projection and narrative congruence? What are the driving factors in narrative contestation?* The analysis highlights factors of *coherence of narrative projection, narrative congruence and the process of narrative contestation* as key aspects of strategic narratives beyond semantic configurations. Coherence of narrative projection is assessed through analysing governance model, bureaucratic politics, and parallel policy narratives. Data collection on coherence in narrative projection relies on secondary sources, incorporating existing research and relevant literature. Narrative congruence is analysed through focusing on non-semiotic structural realities and counternarratives shaping public perceptions. Congruence

analysis relies on relevant ad-hoc and regular survey results as secondary data, exploratory media analysis as well as secondary sources of interpretations. Building on results of coherence and congruence analysis, dynamics of narrative contestation is highlighted through focusing on external actors in the emerging information warfare. Process tracing is used as the primary method to analyse the evolution of narrative contestation. Data collection in this part is based on multiple sources of secondary data as snap-shot secondary data.

### III. Findings and Main Results

#### Evaluating Hypotheses

This research project was structured through a main hypothesis, arguing that an *Integrated Framework for the analysis of strategic narrative can be drawn up by integrating narrative theories through Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical cycle with framing theories, as well as with theorizing on the persuasion capacity of strategic narratives*. The main hypothesis was elaborated through several subhypotheses, explaining and underlining why the main hypothesis is accepted.

A. *Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy can integrate key notions of structuralist and narrative paradigm perspectives, retaining the analytical edges of structuralists perspectives as well as the broader conceptual horizon in the narrative paradigm approach.*

H1/A subhypothesis is accepted. The juxtaposition of structuralist and narrative paradigm perspectives provides complementary insights for the conceptual curation of narrative. The dissertation has demonstrated that ideas from structuralist and narrative paradigm perspectives can be nested in *Ricoeur's hermeneutical cycle*. Structural narratology and classical perspectives on the role of narrative in rhetorical discourse can provide clear conceptual contours, while the narrative paradigm perspective can disrupt assumptions on distinct forms of discourse with the notion of narrative rationality. Ricoeur's cycle highlights stages of *Prefiguration, Configuration and Refiguration* (Ricoeur 1991). *Prefiguration* shows that previous exposure of the audience to stories profoundly shape their experience and expectations as each narrative points to a "before", to the

“lived world,” which is itself already organized as a narrative. *Configuration* refers to the creative act of emplotment, providing a new and unique view of reality through the composition of an explicit story. *Refiguration* refers to the final narrative stage when “the world of the story is restored to the real world” meaning the process when a story configuration is perceived by a recipient. While structuralist perspectives support assessing a narrative’s persuasion capacity by focusing on the *configuration of semantic structures*, the narrative paradigm perspective (Fisher 1984) provides concepts – *narrative probability and narrative fidelity* – linking to all three stages of the cycle. Narrative fidelity is a key aspect in Prefiguration and Configuration, and the Integrated Framework reflects that by highlighting the requirement of resonance between narrative configuration and pre-existing interpretive structures. Narrative probability also fits the hermeneutical cycle, the Integrated Framework highlights focus on narrative probability through semantic consistency and clarity in the Configuration stage; as well as with coherence of narrative projection and narrative congruence in the Refiguration stage.

*B. Ricouer's framework supports focus on the mind-narrative nexus, it is well adaptable to the loop of narrative representations and the inherently dialogical, multi-perspectival and fragmented context of the contemporary media ecology.*

H1/B subhypothesis is accepted. The proposed Integrated Framework reflects the loop of narrative representation by building on Ricoueur's hermeneutical cycle with stages of *Prefiguration*, *Configuration* and *Refiguration*. The Integrated Framework highlights the mind-narrative nexus by focusing on the narrative competence of the audience in the Prefiguration stage, addressing those *preexisting interpretive structures* which are relevant for strategic narratives in International Relations – as *master narratives*, *political myths*, *national role concepts* and *cognitive priors* – through historical institutional analysis. The Integrated Framework also includes focus on the dialogical, multi-perspectival and fragmented context of the contemporary media ecology by assessing *non-semiotic aspects* of a narrative's refiguration, such as *coherence* in narrative projection, narrative *congruence* with structural realities, the encounter with *counternarratives* and the ensuing

process of narrative *contestation*. Focus on the mind-narrative nexus is intertwined with assessing the media ecology and accounting for preexisting interpretive structures and non-semiotic aspects is also linked in the Framework.

*C. Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutic philosophy provides a foundation for conceptualizing strategic narrative in International Relations, through a cyclic understanding of narrative figuration, incorporating semiotic and non-semiotic aspects, integrating the analytical potential of framing theories as well as perspectives on the persuasion capacity of strategic narratives.*

H1/C subhypothesis is accepted. The Integrated Framework highlights Ricoeur's hermeneutical cycle – *Prefiguration, Configuration, Refiguration* – as a basis for integrating interdisciplinary theories and perspectives for analysing strategic narratives in IR. This cyclic perspective helps integrating focus on *semiotic and non-semiotic aspects* of a narrative to avoid reducing analysis to semantic configurations. Integrating focus on context

along *temporal* (Prefiguration, Refiguration) and *non-semiotic aspects* (coherence of projection, narrative congruence, narrative contestation) supports reflection on the dynamics and complexity of international affairs. The Framework also integrates *framing theories* highlighting semiotic aspects of emplotment in the Configuration stage. It recognises narrative as the broader structure applying various framing devices. Framing theories from sociology (*frame alignment, framing tasks*) and behavioural economics (*prospect theory's framing effect*) were contrasted with the literature on strategic narratives in IR, highlighting links between *framing practices* and the *persuasion capacity of strategic narratives*. Fisher's narrative rationality perspective is synthesised with theories on strategic narratives' effectiveness, highlighting *resonance, purpose, probability* and *prospects* as key conditions influencing the persuasive capacity of strategic narratives.

*D. Framing practices solely strengthen the persuasion capacity of strategic narrative, and gain frames are*

*dominant in the strategic narrative of a protracted intervention.*

H1/D subhypothesis is rejected. To address the second part of this subhypothesis, this research contrasted insight from *prospect theory's framing effect*<sup>1</sup> (Kahneman & Tversky 1992) with the *literature's expectation of gain framing* for strategic narrative, finding that such expectations on gain framing can be misleading. Results of the empirical case study underline that instead of permanent gain framing, the narrative of a protracted military intervention may use *both loss and gain frames* along the *evolving dynamics of politico-military realities*, applying loss framing to underline the need for engagement even amid progress, and gain frames when realities challenge the prospect of engagement. To assess the first part of this hypothesis (if framing practices solely strengthen the persuasive capacity of a strategic narrative), the research has examined the effect of using *framing tasks* (Snow & Benford 1988) and *frame alignment* (Snow et al. 1986) in

---

<sup>1</sup> Highlighting the impact of loss frames as increasing risk-taking preferences of an audience.



a strategic narrative. Findings from the empirical case study showed that while *diagnostic and motivational framing tasks generally strengthen, the use of prognostic framing can weaken a narrative's persuasive capacity through decreasing narrative probability*. Diagnostic framing tasks can strengthen narrative probability by enhancing its consistency and clarity and highlighting a compelling purpose. Motivational framing tasks (as norms and values frames) resonating with preexisting interpretive structures can enhance narrative fidelity, improving engagement with the audience. However, in a strategic narrative of a protracted military intervention, the use of prognostic frames can challenge the persuasive capacity of a strategic narrative, since framing the implementation of an intervention over a prolonged period can decrease narrative probability as changes to the rules of engagement and operational objectives can produce inconsistencies in the narrative. Moreover, the use of *frame alignment practices also shows a mixed impact on the persuasive capacity of strategic narratives*. Frame amplification and frame bridging in diagnostic and motivational framing tasks strengthened the narrative's

persuasive capacity by increasing narrative fidelity and narrative probability. But when frame alignment practices as frame extension and frame transformation were used excessively to cover inconsistencies in the narrative, it ultimately harmed narrative probability through decreasing narrative clarity.

### Main Empirical Results

Applying the Integrated Framework on the strategic narrative of France's intervention in the Sahel from 2012-2022 resulted in new empirical results, highlighting aspects of resonance with preexisting interpretive structures, prospect framing, consistency and clarity of purpose framing, coherence of narrative projection, narrative congruence and narrative contestation.

- France's strategic narrative *resonated with key preexisting interpretive* structures as master narratives of sovereignty and humanitarianism, political myths of the Gaullist consensus, and France's active-independent national role concept, while the narrative also attempted to fade cognitive priors of colonialism, neocolonialism and France's unilateral intervention

policy through consolidating the “rupture” narrative. While resonance with France’s active-independent national role concept was constant in the narrative, diminishing resonance with the “rupture” narrative reinforced cognitive priors.

- *Prospect framing* was tailored to the politico-military developments of the intervention. The narrative applied loss framing to underline the need for France’s new or continuous engagement even when operational realities progressed and gain frames when operational realities challenged prospects of France’s engagement in the region.
- Showing a *compelling purpose* in narrative configuration faced challenges as the operations evolved. While diagnostic frames were consistent, clear and focused in the narrative, the use of prognostic frames was confusing, decreased narrative probability. Moreover, several contradictions challenged *narrative consistency*, while certain frame alignment practices (e.g. frame extension and frame transformation) decreased *narrative clarity*, ultimately harming narrative probability.

- Although France's semi-presidential system supported the *coherence of narrative projection* through a centralised projection platform, coherence was weakened by bureaucratic politics and France's parallel public policy narrative on Africa.
- *Congruence* with French security policy objective contributed to narrative probability, but incongruence with structural realities of French economic and geopolitical interests challenged narrative congruence as the intervention prolonged. The mediated environment also challenged narrative probability with the emergence of numerous counternarratives.
- While problems with the narrative's coherence and congruence, weak operational results and local cognitive priors fuelled counternarratives, external actors also boosted them by amplifying anti-colonialist and anti-French frames, driving *narrative contestation* and triggering information warfare activities from France.

#### IV. Main references

Betz, D. (2008). The virtual dimension of contemporary insurgency and counterinsurgency. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 19(4), 510–540.

De Graaf, Dimitriu & Ringsmose Eds. (2015) *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War* Routledge. pp. 3-14.

Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case for public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 51. No. 1. 1–22.

Freedman, L. (2006) ‘The Transformation of Strategic Affairs’, Adelphi Paper 379 London/New York: Routledge for IISS.

Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1992). Advances in Prospect Theory: Cumulative Representation of Uncertainty. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, Vol. 5. No. 4. pp. 297-323.

Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B., Roselle, L. (2013) ‘Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order’ Abingdon: Routledge.

Ricoeur, Paul (1984) *Time and Narrative*. trans. of *Temps et Recit*; 3 vols.; Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983–85; trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer; 3 vols.; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984–88).

Ringsmose, J., & Børgesen, B. K. (2011). Shaping public attitudes towards the deployment of military power: NATO, Afghanistan and the use of Strategic Narratives. *European Security*, 20(4), 505–528. doi:10.1080/09662839.2011.617368

Snow, D. A., Benford R. D. (1988) Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization. *International Social Movement Research*. Vol. 1. pp. 197-218.

## V. List of Publications

Nádudvari, Anna (2018): A 2017-es francia stratégiai felülvizsgálat értékelése. *Nemzet És Biztonság: Biztonságpolitikai Szemle*. 11: 3, pp. 55-78., 24 p.

Nádudvari, Anna (2019): A francia védelmi kiadásokról a 2019–2025-ös védelmi költségvetési törvény alapján. *Nemzet És Biztonság: Biztonságpolitikai Szemle*. 2019: 1, pp. 87-104., 15 p.

Nádudvari, Anna; Etl, Alex; Bereczky, Nikolett (2020): Quo vadis, PESCO? An analysis of cooperative networks and capability development priorities. *Stratégiai Védelmi Kutató Központ Elemzések/ Center For Strategic And Defense Studies Analyses*. 2020: 15, pp. 1-27., 27 p.

Nádudvari, Anna (2020): Az európai védelmi kezdeményezések törésvonalai. *Nemzet És Biztonság: Biztonságpolitikai Szemle* 13: 1, pp. 111-131., 21 p.

Nádudvari, Anna; Varga, Gergely (2019): Az európai biztonság- és védelempolitikai kezdeményezések értékelése Magyarországi szempontjából. (II.) KKI Tanulmányok T-2019/03. 18 p.

Nádudvari, Anna (2020): A konfliktuselemzést megalapozó kutatási irányzatok áttekintése. In: Kovács, Katalin; Tálas, Péter (szerk.) *A konfliktuselemzés módszertani iskoláiról* Budapest, Magyarország: Dialóg Campus Kiadó 167 p. pp. 49-89., 41 p.

Etl-Nádudvari, Anna (2022): Health-Related Aspects of Post-conflict Reconstruction. In: Scott, Romaniuk; Manish, Thapa; Péter, Marton (szerk.) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Security Studies* Cham, Svájc: Palgrave Macmillan. 1,500 p. pp. 1-9., 9 p.

Háda, Béla et al. (2020) Irak stratégiai érdekek ütközőpontjában. *Stratégiai Védelmi Kutató Központ (Elemzések) / Center For Strategic And Defense Studies Analyses*. 2020: 21 pp. 1-21., 21 p.