



ADMM Cybersecurity and  
Information Centre of Excellence

# Monthly Digest

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*A monthly round-up of significant news around the world*

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## Cognitive Resilience

### Fortifying our Forces: Enhancing Cognitive Resilience

1. A US-based journal *Biobehavioural Resilience to Stress* defined cognitive resilience as the “capacity to overcome the negative effects of setbacks and associated stress on cognitive function or performance”. According to the *Journal of Mental Health Disorders*, military personnel often face high-stress circumstances that demand strong cognitive abilities. A study published in June 2021 in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that higher self-rated resilience in Swiss youth recruits during Basic Military Training (BMT), often perceived as a stressful period, was associated with lower stress signs and better performance, which was consistent with higher performance ratings by these recruits’ superiors. To increase the military’s ability to counter its adversaries, and achieve operational effectiveness in the battlefield, it is important to understand the factors affecting cognitive resilience.

2. Disinformation Affecting Resilience and Cohesiveness. In November 2023, *Military Medicine* published research findings that 66% of US soldiers perceived that disinformation regarding global events might have a negative impact on the Army’s operational readiness. Perceptions of disinformation problems for the Army were associated with perceptions of lower unit cohesiveness and operational readiness. With the digitalisation of the information landscape enabling faster spread of fake news within and outside the military, there is an increasing need to guard against disinformation from external and internal actors, which could disrupt the military’s cognitive resilience and operational readiness.

3. Impact of Public Perception on Cognitive Resilience. Public perception of the military, including public support for the military, can affect soldiers' will to fight. According to a Norwegian study in June 2020 by the Institute of Strategy and Leadership in the University of Agder, in the case of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, strong public support for the Ukrainian military contributed to the surprisingly high resilience of the military, which persevered in a long-drawn battle against their stronger opponent. Conversely, the low public morale in Russia was one of the reasons for its failure to secure a swift victory over Ukraine. Positive public opinion about the military could therefore strengthen military personnel's sense of purpose and value, and consequently their cognitive resilience to fight and persevere in times of conflict.



*A Russian protestant brandishes an anti-war placard that translates to "No war"  
(Source: Deutsche Welle)*

### *Ways to Increase Cognitive Resilience*

4. Raising Media Literacy in the Military. Recognising the need to raise media literacy and protect the military against the impacts of disinformation, researchers from the University of Tartu developed a media literacy learning programme for the Estonian Defence Forces, providing structured group-level education and customised individual education for its personnel. This programme, which incorporated experiential learning and gamification techniques, was effective in enabling Estonian soldiers to identify the most prevalent sources of disinformation that they were regularly exposed to. Through adopting a counter-disinformation strategy catered to the different media literacy levels of soldiers, militaries can better address the perils of disinformation, which could negatively impact their cognitive resilience.

5. Improving Public Perception towards the Military. As public support for the military is associated with higher cognitive resilience, it is important for militaries to invest resources to improve public perception. For example, the ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute reported in 2022 that the Indonesian military had

attained a high level of public trust between 2014 and 2021, based on nationwide surveys conducted by Indikator Politik Indonesia (INDIKATOR), where citizens perceived military participation to be an honourable way of defending their country. In Singapore, the Ministry of Defence aims to inspire greater appreciation in Singaporean youths towards national defence through National Education and Total Defence touchpoints in schools. A survey of public perceptions by the Institute of Policy Studies in 2023 found that 93% of Singaporeans would support compulsory National Service, even if there were no imminent threats to Singapore. Similarly, the Center for National Defence Education (CNDE) in Vietnam aims to create awareness amongst students about national defence and security.

6. Improving Team Cohesiveness and Performance. Some ways to enhance team cohesiveness include inculcating a positive work environment of mutual support and information sharing, which contributes to the individual's well-being and cognitive resilience in times of stress and challenges. Even for militaries, it is vital to create psychologically safe environments that allow individual soldiers to thrive, and the military to unite and persevere against all odds.

# Information Operations

## Falsifying History: Foreign Influence via Historical Propaganda

### *Historical Propaganda and Historical Negationism*

1. Since antiquity, political entities have attempted to manipulate historical events to their advantage in what is more commonly termed as historical propaganda. Historical negationism is a subset of historical propaganda that uses the *falsification or distortion of the historical record* to propagate a false narrative. While sharing a common history is a key part to nation building, governments can also manipulate the recounting of historical events to advocate for their desired national and foreign policies.

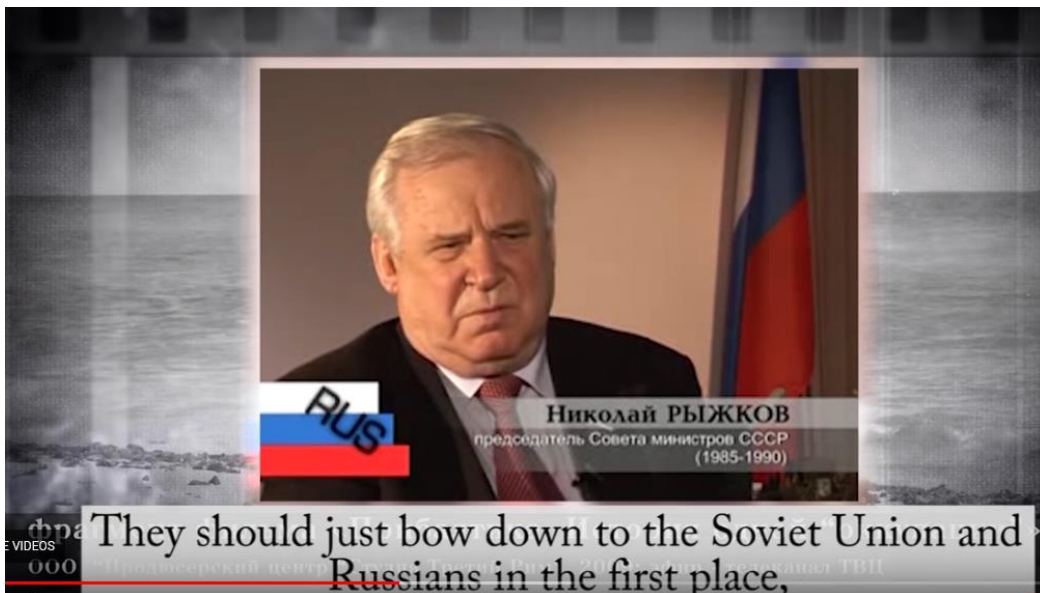
### *The Case of Russian Information Campaigns in Eastern Europe*

2. Throughout the course of history, the Russian Federation had used historical negationism. Russian state actors had sought to employ “historical-based cleavages and political divisions in foreign countries to favour...narratives justifying their domestic and expansionist foreign policy”. These activities were often “based on fabricated parallelisms with what the Kremlin alleges to be happening in the West”. This has included the setting up of specific organisations like the Russian Military-Historical Society (RMHS) in 2010 to coordinate the pro-Russian narratives espoused by their academics and journalists. Some of the narratives and techniques used by Russian actors are explored below, as well as select examples where they have been used elsewhere.

3. Romanticising/Denigrating Foreign Regimes. In a bid to build legitimacy for Russian actions, Russian actors have attempted to frame the conflict with Ukraine along the same lines as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)’s fight against Nazism in World War II. The Russians have portrayed controversial Ukrainian WWII nationalist hero Stepan Bandera as an explicit Nazi collaborator, while associating traditional narratives around Ukrainian resistance fighters against Nazis with the USSR’s own efforts. In 2014, Putin would assert that the annexation of Crimea was “saving [locals] from the new Ukrainian leaders who are ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler’s accomplice during World War II”. Such activities mirror how the government of North Korea had sought to fabricate war crime allegations against the UN forces during the Korean War, while denying their own crimes and culpability for starting the war. These activities included the denial of Soviet records which

went against this narrative, with the North Korean Central News Agency repeatedly describing it as “sheer forgery”.

4. Evoking Nostalgia from the Past. Russian aims to engender friendlier attitudes towards Russia are also seen in their attempt to revise historical narratives regarding the USSR. Russian actors had sought to portray USSR suzerainty as benevolent and enlightened. For example, it was a common narrative espoused by Russian state media that people in the Baltic states were better off in the Soviet Union compared to nowadays. Russian state broadcaster TVC reported this narrative in 2017, commenting that “[Russia] should submit a bill to Latvia for constructing ports, industry and economy”. Other media articles also distorted figures and records of Soviet investment in the Baltics.



*Example of Russian Historical Propaganda narratives on the Baltics  
(Source: Russian state broadcaster TVC (2017))*

5. Denying Past Crimes. To evoke nostalgia, Russian actors had also sought to downplay negative aspects of the USSR in an effort to rehabilitate the old regime. An example would be the Russian denial of the Katyn Forest massacre, where the old USSR executed 22,000 Polish prisoners-of-war mostly in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk. The bodies were subsequently uncovered and documented by Nazi Germany during their invasion of Russia. Russian authorities have traditionally denied any involvement in the massacre, despite a brief attempt at rapprochement in 2010. However, in recent years, Russian politicians and media began propagating the old lines that the massacre never took place. For example, in 2022, a number of Russian politicians advocated demolishing parts of the memorial. Furthermore, in 2023, Russian state-owned news agency RIA Novosti reported that according to “a number of Russian historians, the executions in Katyn were carried out by the Nazis”. Such actions

are similar to attempts by Serbian nationalists to deny their complicity of war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. For example, the 1995 Srebrenica genocide that saw the killing of more than 8,000 Bosniak Muslims continue to be denied by Serbian politicians and media.

6. Accusing Other Countries of Historical Negationism. Russian information campaigns have on occasions pre-emptively blamed Eastern European scholars for engaging in falsification of history themselves. For example, in response to Baltic scholars' claims that atrocities were committed against local populations, Russian historian and RMHS member Armen Gasparyan wrote that "there was nothing like this in the Baltics...according to the documents it was not at all the same as they say in Tallinn, Vilnius and Riga." [*Note: Gasparyan had previously published books and articles that popularised the term "denazification" in Russia and used it in relation to Ukraine. Ukrainian courts in 2023 sentenced him to ten years in prison in absentia for his activities.*]

#### *Implications for Practitioners*

7. Russian use of historical propaganda and historical negationism can easily be applied elsewhere in the world, including our region. The misinterpretation or outright falsification of documents and records to "prove" the USSR's benevolence in the Baltics parallels the way the forged Protocols of the Elders of Zion were used by the Nazis to prove Jewish conspiracies. States could use purposely misinterpreted documents to make territorial or legitimising claims. Similarly, Russian attempts to downplay or deny their role in atrocities is not something new; such tactics have been employed in conflicts such as the Bosnian War or the Rwandan genocide, or other similar oppressive activities in World War II in Southeast Asia. This demonstrates the clear and present danger that the use of historical propaganda poses to practitioners in the region, and the need to pre-empt and inoculate the populace against their potential effects.

8. To counter the effects of historical propaganda, governments should be ready to proactively debunk historical falsehoods, especially those promoted through foreign interference. In addition, enhancing information sharing and building digital literacy are key to building a first line of defence within our populace to recognise and report such threats. These ground-up efforts would reflect the populace's resilience against such falsehoods and aid the authorities in the fight against foreign interference.

# Terrorism

## Deaths of Prominent AQ/AQ-linked Leaders

1. On 13 February 2024, deceased Al-Qaeda (AQ) emir Ayman Al-Zawahiri's brother, Muhammad bin Muhammad Rabi' Al-Zawahiri, reportedly died in Egypt. Various pro-AQ clerics, media units and supporters mourned his death. However, there was no official confirmation of Zawahiri's death.
2. On 11 March 2024, AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) formally announced the death of its previous emir, Khalid Batarfi, and the appointment of its new emir, Saad bin Atef Al-Awlaki. Batarfi had assumed leadership in 2020 and continued insurgent operations against the Yemeni government. Similar to the death of Zawahiri, various AQ-linked/aligned media units and supporters mourned Batarfi's death.



*Muhammad bin Muhammad Rabi' Al-Zawahiri, Khalid Batarfi, Saad bin Atef Al-Awlaki (left to right)*

## Emergence of New Regional Media Group, Al-Aan Foundation

3. Al-Aan Foundation (AAF) was first established in October 2023, and observed to be actively disseminating terror propaganda since February 2024. AAF is notable for posting content in a wide variety of languages, including English, French and Malay.
4. On 18 February 2024, AAF issued a series of posters calling for car and truck rammings, knifings and the usage of 3D-printed guns against the US, Russian and Chinese embassies in Malaysia.
5. AAF was also involved in soliciting cryptocurrency donations for Filipino media group Al-Fursan Media, with its logo included in posters asking for contributions through the cryptocurrency Monero.



Extremist posters in French and English, and poster soliciting cryptocurrency donations (left to right)

## Latest Attacks Claimed by ISIS-East Asia

6. Between 16 and 18 February 2024, ISIS-East Asia (ISIS-EA) claimed three attacks in Lanao del Norte, Philippines, which killed and wounded at least 11 personnel from the Armed Forces of the Philippines. ISIS-EA’s last claim of an attack was in early-January 2024.

7. Notably, ISIS-EA has claimed attacks in Lanao del Norte since December 2023, where the Maute Group is known to have a strong presence.

## CONTACT DETAILS

All reports can be retrieved from our website at [www.acice-asean.org/resource/](http://www.acice-asean.org/resource/).

For any queries and/or clarifications, please contact ACICE at [ACICE@defence.gov.sg](mailto:ACICE@defence.gov.sg).

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