

Nordic Center for Cultural Heritage and Armed Conflict · CHAC

Report

NATO AND CULTURAL PROPERTY: A HYBRID THREAT PERSPECTIVE



Frontpage:

Mausoleums at the Bakhchysarai Palace of the Crimean Tatar Khans located in the town of Bakhchysarai, Crimea. The Khan's Palace was placed on UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List back in 2003. According to UNESCO, under the Russian Occupation of Crimea, the Khan's palace has been intentionally destroyed and damaged by Russia as a part of a broader hostile misappropriation of Ukrainian cultural heritage.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACO	NATO Allied Command Operations
AJEPP	Allied Joint Environment Protection Publications
AJOD WG	NATO Allied Joint Doctrine Working Group
AU	African Union
CCOE	NATO CIMIC Center of Excellence
CCOMC	Comprehensive Crisis and Operations Management Centre (NATO SHAPE)
CIMIC	Civil-Military Co-operation
CJOP	Joint Common Operational Picture
CONOPS	Concept of Operations
CP	Cultural Property
CPC	Cultural Property in Conflict
CPOE	Comprehensive Preparation of the Operational Environment
CULAD	Cultural Advisor
DIA	United States Defence Intelligence Agency
EU	European Union
GIS	Geospatial Information System
ICC	International Criminal Court
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
IL	International Law
JALLC	NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre
JHQ	Joint Headquarters
JTCB	Joint Targeting Coordination Board
JTS	Joint Targeting System
KFOR	NATO Kosovo Force
LOAC	Laws of Armed Conflict
MC	NATO Military Committee
MCJSB	NATO Military Committee Joint Standardisation Board
MOUT	Military Operations in Urban Terrain
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NATO SPS	NATO Science for Peace and Security Program
NATO SPS	NATO SPS Cultural Property Protection project
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NIFC	NATO Intelligence Fusion Centre
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPLAN	Operational Plan
OUP NATO	Operation Unified Protector (Libya)
PfP	NATO Partnership-for-Peace
SACEUR	NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SACT	NATO Supreme Allied Command Transformation
SHAPE	NATO Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
SITCEN	NATO Situation Centre (HQ Brussels)
SOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
STANAG	NATO Standardization Agreements
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WG	Working Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NATO views cultural property (CP) as an essential part of the security environment that can constitute a crucial element in strategic, operational, and tactical considerations.

This report examines a particular aspect of this outlook, namely NATO's linking of CP protection (CPP) with NATO's agenda on Countering Hybrid Threats.

The report identifies how the misappropriation, manipulation, destruction, and exploitation of CP can and are being employed as an element of hybrid warfare in the cognitive domain to create political, strategic, or tactical effects in support of policy objectives. Furthermore, it elaborates an account of how such an understanding of CP can inform NATO's development of Comprehensive Preventive and Response Measures against hybrid threats.

A main point of the report is that both tactical (provocation, destabilisation, conflict escalation) and strategic (geopolitical objectives) uses of CP belong to the cognitive domain of warfare. The aim is not to destroy the enemy's military force

or critical infrastructure, nor is the purpose to physically conquer territory or secure passage-ways. The aim is to engage with feelings and affective dispositions of populations to steer the situation against a desired long or short-term end-state.

From a military perspective, the kind of misappropriation, manipulation, and destruction of CP we see in recent and ongoing conflicts thus looks more like a hybrid strategy than conventional warfare.

The political gravity of CP and its tactical and strategic implications in relation to conflicts are likely to have bearing on NATO operations and the alliance's broader strategic agenda. This points at an added value for NATO to further embrace CPP as a topic that warrants strategic, operational, and tactical considerations beyond the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC).

NATO and Cultural Property: A Hybrid Threat Perspective

During the dinner at the 2019 international conference at the NATO Headquarters, “NATO and Cultural Property. Embracing New Challenges in the Era of Identity Wars”¹, messages started ticking in that the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris was on fire. The conference participants’ immediate thought was that this was an arson attack by jihadists. It was not. But the scenario was not unimaginable. A topic addressed with great concern at the conference was the trend in which belligerents destroy Cultural Property (CP) to fuel rage and antagonism. CP, like the cathedral of Notre-Dame, has become a societal vulnerability that lends itself to irregular attacks, and its destruction or misappropriation may trigger destabilisation and eruptions of violence.

Across ongoing and recent armed conflicts, CP plays an increasing role as belligerents exploit it for domination and display of power. The security challenges related to cultural property in connection with armed conflicts have moved way beyond legal protection. Rather, CP has become a frontier.

Accordingly, NATO has broadened its view on CP from a Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) matter to view it as a component of the broader security environment with strategic, operational, and tactical implications.

This report examines a particular aspect of this development, namely NATO’s linking of CP protection (CPP) with NATO’s agenda on countering hybrid threats. The report identifies how the misappropriation, manipulation and destruction of CP can and are being employed as an element of hybrid warfare in the cognitive domain to create political, strategic, or tactical effects in support of policy objectives.

Furthermore, it aims to elaborate how a security-framed understanding of CP’s importance can inform NATO’s development of Comprehensive Preventive and Response Measures against hybrid threats, as well as help us understand the wider connection between CP and conflict.

To this aim, the report first explains the concept of CP and its developing role in conflicts, recently described as the “heritage-security nexus”. It then outlines NATO’s concept of “Hybrid Threats” and uses this to frame a concept of CP as another valuable hybrid tool in the cognitive domain. The last part of the report explores a range of examples and scenarios related to CP and conflicts to develop an empirically informed framing of CP as a hybrid threat issue.

The Evolving NATO Framework For Cultural Property

NATO’s approach to CP, viz. places, objects and areas of significant cultural value, has been guided primarily by LOAC and issues related to legal protection and the avoidance of combat-related collateral damage to CP.

Until 2015, the only unit in NATO that focused on CPP was NATO’s Environment Protection Working Group (EPWG). The EPWG functions under the Military Committee Joint Standardization Board, which reports to the Military Committee. It serves to further cooperation and standardisation among NATO, partner countries, and international organisations. The EPWG’s mandate was limited to only monitor any CPP developments in NATO without authorisation to take any active steps.

From 2015 and onward, propelled by a NATO Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Project on

¹ ‘NATO and Cultural Property Protection - Embracing New Challenges in the Era of Identity Wars’, international conference organized by the Office of the Secretary General,

Human Security Unit, in cooperation with the Nordic Center for Cultural Heritage and Armed Conflict, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 15. to 16. of April 2019.

CPP² and related activities, including the collection of lessons identified from NATO and Non-NATO military operations, NATO's attention to CPP moved progressively beyond LOAC.

The focus on CPP first shifted from Environmental Protection to viewing CPP as a cross-cutting issue placed along other protection issues (Gender, Children and Armed Conflict, Protection of Civilians, Human Trafficking) within the NATO Human Security Framework, and then towards a broader operational issue. Accordingly, the NATO Secretary General's Annual Report 2020 highlights that, "The protection of CP and common heritage has been a core NATO value since its foundation in 1949. As an essential aspect of the security environment, CP and its protection can constitute a crucial element in strategic, operational, and tactical considerations."³ The Secretary General here refers to the North Atlantic Treaty, which states the determination of the Alliance to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples."

Both NATO's strategic Commands, Supreme Allied Command Transformation (HQ SACT) and Supreme Headquarter Allied Power Europe (SHAPE), as well as NATO Headquarters, show an increasing interest in the topic.

In NATO Headquarters, NATO recently placed the topic of CPP within the Human Security Framework together with other cross-cutting protection issues. Yet, NATO's rationalities for considering CP differ from the humanitarian concerns about physical harm and suffering to humans underlying the Human Security Framework. Rather, the rationalities underpinning NATO's approach to CPP include concerns related

to *inter alia* LOAC, conflict escalation, troop protection, post-conflict stabilisation, reconciliation, and resilience, as well as hybrid threats.

On top of that comes issues related to conflict economies including the financing of terrorism and armed groups. NATO also views CPP as essential to the Protection of Civilians (POC) agenda.⁴

NATO's recasting of CP as an element of the security environment and a challenge to be tackled by strategic, operational, and tactical levels of operational planning and execution is reflected at the strategic command level, as enshrined in the NATO Bi-Strategic Command Directive, "Implementing CP Protection in NATO Operations and Missions", adopted in 2019.⁵ The directive covers LOAC, financing of terrorism, as well as strategic issues related to navigating operations in geographical areas with culturally important places, including Strategic Communication.

CP: A Tool of Hybrid Warfare

Among the key rationales for establishing roles and responsibilities related to CPP across all operational phases and functions, the Bi-Strategic Command Directive mentions that "CP can be used as a tool of hybrid warfare. Attacks on CP may impact societal resilience and indicate an attempt to undermine national unity or identity. They may also impact the Alliance's cohesion. This reinforces the need for CP to be an integral part of NATO's continuous strategic awareness."

The directive also states that, "Powerful images of CP destruction, such as the destruction of

² 'Best Practices for CP protection in NATO-led Military Operations', NATO Science for Peace and Security Series of Advanced Research Workshop (2015-2018) in NATO often referred to as the "NATO SPS CPP" (directed by CHAC). See outcome report, 'NATO AND CULTURAL PROPERTY. Embracing New Challenges in the Era of Identity Wars'. Copenhagen: Nordic Center for Cultural Heritage and Armed Conflict; see also NATO Allied Command Transformation (2017): Cultural Property Protection: NATO and other Perspectives, NATO Legal Gazette, 38.

³ NATO SG report 2020, p. 77.

⁴ Bernard Lebrun, Brigadier General, Head of the CIMIC Division of Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) (2021): Presentation at NATO Protection of Civilians Workshop - NATO's Human Security Conference 2021, Friday 26th February.

⁵ NATO Bi-Strategic Command Directive, "Implementing CP Protection in NATO Operations and Missions", Bi-Strategic Command Directive 086-005, 01 April 2019.

World Heritage sites, have become tools of Information Warfare. Therefore, failure to protect CP may have tactical and strategic consequences” and that the “Destruction of CP may hamper reconciliation and healing of societies after conflict.”

The directive here echoes United Nations Security Resolution 2347 (2017), which stated that, “The unlawful destruction of cultural heritage (...) can fuel and exacerbate conflict and hamper post-conflict national reconciliation, thereby undermining the security, stability, governance, social, economic and cultural development of affected States.” Similar concerns about the exploitation of CP for conflict escalation and destabilisation are heard from other organisations⁶ as well as academic researchers.⁷

The Secretary General’s Annual Report 2020 and the Bi-Strategic Command Directive indicate how NATO’s attention to CP has moved beyond LOAC to embrace a wider set of tactical and strategic implications relevant for NATO operations. The development echoes the general turn in the international community and conflict analysis towards casting CP as an issue of international security.⁸

It also echoes how the CP-related challenges NATO and its member states have encountered are not primarily about LOAC and protection.⁹ The challenges to NATO rather lie with the various political implications related to CP in operational areas. The social power of CP has proved to be prone to exploitation by adversaries

for the purpose of fuelling antagonisms and spurring unrest, destabilisation, and violence.¹⁰

One example is NATO’s mission in Kosovo, KFOR, where destabilising issues related to CP remain one of the top three reasons for NATO to sustain the mission. Other recent conflicts where CP forms parts of, or has formed part of, a territorial dispute include Ukraine, Daesh in Syria and Iraq, Yemen, Mali, Nagorno-Karabakh, Myanmar, Cyprus, not to mention Israel-Palestine. However, CP forms part of the reality of violent conflicts all over the world, with Southeast Asia counting for the highest prevalence of conflict-related attacks against CP.¹¹ It is a global challenge.

Another set of lessons identified arises from military operations in Afghanistan as well as member state involvement in operations in Iraq and Syria where CP issues have been related to conflict management, escalation of violence and terrorism propaganda and financing. We have also seen how damage to CP can cause negative press and undermine the legitimacy of a mission.

This was the case with the looting of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad in 2003 after the U.S. invasion, where the U.S. troops drew considerable international attention and criticisms for not safeguarding the museum; a stain which after almost 20 years has still not been forgotten.

Jihadi and other extremist religious groups also increasingly target CP including places of worship (shrines, synagogues, mosques, churches) and places of significant symbolic value, from the world-order changing attack on the World Trade

⁶ For accounts of the United Nations Peacekeeping agenda, see Foradori, P., & Rosa, P. (2017). ‘Expanding the peacekeeping agenda. The protection of cultural heritage in war-torn societies’, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 29:2, 145-160.

⁷ Thomas G Weiss & Nina Connelly (2019). ‘Protecting cultural heritage in war zones’, *Third World Quarterly*, 40:1, 1-17.

⁸ Claire Finkelstein, Derek Gilman, & Frederik Rosén (2021) (ed.): *The Preservation of Art and Culture in Times of War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Research conducted in connection with the NATO SPS CPP found no considerable combat related damage to CP in NATO-led operations. It found some harm related to base camp construction and military-led infrastructure projects.

¹⁰ Frederik Rosén: (2020): The dark side of cultural heritage protection. *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 27(4), pp. 495-510; Weiss, TG. & Connelly, N. (2019). ‘Protecting cultural heritage in war zones’, *Third World Quarterly*, 40:1, 1-17; Russo, A & Giusti, S (2019): ‘The securitisation of cultural heritage’. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 25:7, 843-857.

¹¹ According to a 2020 database study at conducted at Uppsala University, 27% of the attack on CP in the period 1989-2014 occurred in the Middle East and 44% of the events occurred in Southeast Asia. See Croicu, M & Kreutz, J (2020). ‘Where do cultures clash? A cross-national investigation of attacks on religious sites.’ Uppsala University: Working paper.

Center in 2001 to recent attacks on Mosques, churches, shrines and synagogues.

CP, including places of worship, are therefore increasingly addressed in operational planning considerations in NATO from strategic to tactical levels.

The Concept of CP

While NATO's strategic commands decided to link CP and hybrid warfare in a command Directive, they failed to describe in which ways CP may be exploited for hybrid warfare purposes, or how it fits into NATO's evolving approach on Countering Hybrid Threats. The first step towards a concept development on this matter is to demarcate the concept of CP and outline the developing role of such places and objects in contemporary security.

LOAC

The 1954 Hague Convention offers a wide definition of what kind of objects and places that can be considered "CP." These include historical buildings and other monuments of historic, artistic, or architectural significance, objects and places of scientific value, places of worship, moveable objects from paintings to antiquities, manuscripts libraries, art collections, archives, and even digital collections.¹² It covers cultural underwater objects and thus also applies to Navy operations.

Furthermore, Additional Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions expanded the common interpretation of "places of worship" from religious buildings representing a cultural value, to places that "constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of peoples", thus including places of worship (shrines, synagogues, churches,

mosques, etc.) by their contemporary use and reverence value.

Starting in the late 1980s, the terms 'cultural heritage' and/or 'CP' are often used interchangeably¹³ in common language as well as in international law.¹⁴

Before the adoption of the 1954 Hague Convention, the world did neither have a legal category nor a political concept that grouped diverse places and objects of cultural interest within the same legal category. Compared to the killing of soldiers and civilians during armed conflicts, another key LOAC topic, the historical debates and norm developments related to CP and warfare appear very limited. Hence, the international legal definition of CP is what lawyers call progressive lawmaking, as a contrast to codifying already existing norms.

The LOAC provides a cornerstone for NATO's self-understanding and operations, and as all member states (apart from one) have ratified the 1954 Hague Convention, its concept of CP is thus well established in NATO (even if not a NATO concept as such). The rules of the 1954 Hague Convention bind all concerned Nations and individuals. NATO itself is not and cannot be a party to international treaties.

"CPP"

In that regard it may be noticed, however, that the concept of "CP Protection" (CPP), which is used in NATO along other cross-cutting protection issues (i.e., Protection of Civilians (POC), Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), Human Trafficking), is not a legal term. The expression is no more than a descriptive label for a range of practices geared towards respecting and safeguarding CP in the event of armed conflict. Many of these practices are obligatory as a matter of international law. Others may not be.

¹² Roger O'Keefe (2016): CP Protection. Military Manual. Paris: UNESCO, pp. 14f.

¹³ As a political organization, NATO prefers the term 'CP' due to its definition in LOAC, namely the 1954 Hauge Convention for

the Protection of CP and the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions.

¹⁴ Lyndell Prott and Patrick O'Keefe (1992) 'Cultural Heritage' or 'Cultural Property?' *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 1, 307-320.

Some of the practices may aim at protection. Others may aim at strategic and tactical issues, which may also include hybrid threat considerations.

From a commander's perspective, LOAC's wide definition of CP sometimes creates confusion about how to build an operational approach around the legal concept of "CP", because exactly what should be the scope of it, and what is the value threshold for triggering legal protection?

From a hybrid threats perspective on CP, however, it does not matter whether an object is protected or not by international law. What matters is the perceived cultural value and the potential emotional reaction in a certain historical context, and how this cognitive dimension may be exploited as a part of a hybrid strategy, as tools of coercion, domination and destabilisation.

The Hague Convention's and the Geneva Convention's broad legal definition of places and objects that may be considered CP here offers a wide prism for the purpose of identifying and discussing CP as a hybrid threats issue.

Yet it is also worth looking beyond LOAC definitions of CP, for instance, UNESCO's concept of Cultural Landscape, which emphasises landscapes that are believed to hold important religious or cultural values.¹⁵ The cases of Kosovo and Crimea may partly be understood through that lens, not to mention the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Recasting the Notion of CP

To understand the socio-political power of CP and its role in conflicts, including of a hybrid nature, we need to zoom in on societal values and collective sentiments and emotions, the constitution of significant cultural value, which constitutes CP in the first place. CP becomes valued as CP due to collective sentiments, attitudes, and the perceived value of the object

or place in question. What matters is the underlying symbolic or 'sacred' dimension of such objects and places; the value that objects and places hold to major entities including to their notions of nationalism, ethnicity, and religion.

These places and objects function as referents that articulate a sense of belonging to a distinctive group, cause, or territory. They are often material anchors of culture, identity, and notions of belonging to a community, with an ability to mobilise strong sentiments, politics and action. People's care for CP can be inflamed to such an extent that they are willing to sacrifice privileges, or even in its most intense form, their life, to preserve and protect them.

Historical and contemporary examples of how destruction, desecration, appropriation, vandalism, and misappropriation of places and objects of significant cultural value have fuelled conflicts and been exploited for the purpose of domination and destabilisation, should be researched and understood: the aim is never to destroy the enemy's military force or critical infrastructure, nor is the purpose to physically conquer territory or secure passageways. The aim is always to engage with feelings and affective dispositions of populations to steer the situation against a desired long or short-term end-state.

Therefore, from a hybrid threat perspective, "CP" becomes relevant as a cognitive domain issue with a propensity to spark strong emotional reactions. Regardless of its legal status, if destroyed, appropriated, vandalised, desecrated, misappropriated, it may even incite violence. This propensity constitutes a societal vulnerability that adversaries may exploit, and therefore it has tactical and strategic implications.

The Heritage-Security Nexus

The rise of CP as a hybrid threat issue comes with a history. In 2006, Samuel P. Huntington

¹⁵ See John Wylie (2007): *Landscape*. London: Routledge.

envisaged, “In the coming decades, questions of identity, meaning cultural heritage, language, and religion will play a central role in politics,” alluding to the shift in association and antagonism among the countries he analysed in his 1992 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.¹⁶

Looking at current world politics and the role of CP in war and conflict, we see how Huntington’s prediction materialises: Belligerents and competing powers, states and non-state actors alike, today increasingly exploit the social power of CP to show moral superiority, induce fear, provoke, destabilise communities and nations, escalate tensions and conflicts, and restructure the cultural dimension of geopolitical orders.¹⁷ This has been noted by i.e., NATO, UNESCO, the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, and academic scholars.

A range of mutually reinforcing developments shape this agenda. These include, but are not limited to, the rise of identity politics as conflict drivers; the transnationalisation and globalisation of conflicts, and the ensuing turn to cultural belonging and group identity rather than nation-state borders to demarcate security communities; the extensive growth and spread of new norms and laws related to cultural heritage in armed conflict as well as more generally¹⁸; the urbanisation of warfare and the rise of asymmetric and hybrid forms of warfare; developments in global social media; and the rapidly evolving transnational market for illicit antiquities, enabling armed groups to more easily profit from looting and trafficking antiquities.

From that perspective, LOAC must be viewed merely as one element in an array of norms and values that distinguishes and ascribes meaning to CP.

While not entirely new in kind, violence against CP today implicates a new and “modern” power base and involves new legal, political, and moral complexities for populations, states, international organisations – and military.

Scholars have coined the term the “heritage-security nexus” to refer to this new framing of CP (or, cultural heritage) as a broader security issue.¹⁹ The concept of the heritage-security nexus joins the recent family of “nexus”-concepts, coined to describe cross-sectoral challenges and cooperation to understand and address a complex problem (the “development-security nexus,” the “climate-security nexus,” the “migration-security nexus”, etc.). For instance, international legal instruments that were previously dedicated just to protecting CP against looting and illicit cross-border trade have today become instruments in curbing the financing of terrorism, and thus the protection of society.

At the heart of the concept of the “heritage-security nexus” lies the observation that if CP can be viewed as a stabilising factor for groups and populations by functioning as references for shared cultural dispositions and preferences, it may, congruently, be exploited for the purpose of societal destabilisation, conflict escalation and domination, including towards minorities, viz. as a security or even a defence issue.²⁰

NATO, Hybrid Threats

¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon and Schuster 1992).

¹⁷ Brosché, J., Legnér, M., Kreutz, J., & Ijla, A. (2017). ‘Heritage under attack: motives for targeting CP during armed conflict’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23:3, 248-260.

¹⁸ Astrid Swenson (2013): *The Rise of Heritage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Frederik Rosén (2021): ‘Introduction’, in Claire Finkelstein, Derek Gilman & Frederik Rosén (2021): *The Preservation of Heritage in Times of War*. Oxford University Press.

²⁰ In a NATO context, a distinction is often drawn between security and defence to distinguish between “what NATO does in the field of hard-core deterrence (...) and what it does as a response to a humanitarian emergency, in the capacity building domain, or in the management of the COVID crisis.” Yet “the continuum between security and defence is well understood. As a matter of fact, such a continuum has characterised NATO’s evolution over the last 30 years, as illustrated by its operations in the Western Balkans and Afghanistan.” See Thierry Tardy (2020): *The risks of NATO’s maladaptation*, European Security, p. 3 (Published online: 31 Jul 2020).

The Strategy on NATO's Role in Countering Hybrid Warfare, agreed by Allies in 2015, offers a perspective on how state as well as non-state actors may exploit vulnerabilities, differences, and/or any other perceived grievances to incite coercion, domination and destabilisation.

The globalisation of the geostrategic environment and advancement of technologies created many opportunities and also vulnerabilities in our societies and structures. Our understanding of a hybrid threat is blurred, and our defenses are incomparably weaker than against conventional weapons. Already back in 1999, Chinese military strategists concluded that "anything that can benefit mankind, can also harm it. This is to say that there is nothing in the world today that cannot become a weapon."²¹

Hybrid warfare follows the same model as any other form of war: our adversaries have clearly set goals and end-states, they have dedicated and designed weapons to fight it and carefully chose battlefields to maximise the effectiveness of their campaigns and their weapons.

Admittedly, the goals are less about territorial gains, but coercion, control, and disruption of existing international order. In this war, the adversaries' main goal is to influence the will and manipulate strategic choices of our citizens and decision-makers to shape perceptions, alter consciousness and challenge strategic calculus.

The concept of hybrid warfare remains contested, and recent commentators describe it "[as] at best simply a neologism for tactical innovation." It can be argued that from a history of warfare perspective, nothing new under the sun, when it comes to asymmetry and creative approaches to undermining the enemy. Historically viewed, the range of means and tricks opponents have used to undermine each other is very wide.

However, it is also true that states, analysts, and commentators alike have tended to focus mostly on brute force when it comes to military affairs, something that has shaped state attitudes as well as the outlook and capabilities of military organisations. The 'aha'-experience with hearts and minds issues and the role of culture on the battlefield coming out of Afghanistan reveals an amnesia towards these "regular irregular" dimensions of armed conflicts.

From NATO's perspective, adversaries and challenges aim to undermine the mutual confidence of the NATO countries and dissolve it from within by attacking all the vital and weak points of the Alliance. While this aim historically remained the same, available tools to do so in the 21st century have changed. They are far more dangerous, in part, because we as societies and organisations have changed too. The speed, interconnectedness and unruliness of new Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including social media, is one major shift.

For this very reason, within the NATO HQ, the responsibility for understanding, identifying and responding to hybrid threats is shared among a number of civilian and military divisions such as Joint Intelligence, Operations and Emerging Security Challenges. Complex and multi-dimensional challenges require multi-dimensional solutions.

NATO's 2018 definition of hybrid threat is a "type of threat that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space."²² The focus of the hybrid threat perspective lies predominantly on the asymmetrical and irregular tactics that "can be overt or covert, involving military, paramilitary, organized criminal networks, and civilian actors across all elements of power."²³ It may include a range of non-military tactics for destabilising adversaries from

²¹ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui (1999): Unrestricted warfare. Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, p. 25.

²² See NATO Standardization Office, 'NATOTerm The Official NATO Terminology Database'.

²³ NATO White Paper, NATO Transformation Seminar 2015, Washington, DC 24-26 March 2015, p. 5. <
https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/events/2015/nts/NATO_NTS_2015_White_Paper_Final_Public_Version.pdf >

within, ranging from propaganda, deception and sabotage to trolling, targeted disinformation, cyber-attacks and covert use of military force. It is most commonly applied in a 'grey area' of conflict, just below the threshold of armed conflict.

In addition to speed, synchronisation, ambiguity, and coercion stand as key features of hybrid threats as several methods of destabilisation may be employed simultaneously, in a more or less synchronised manner. NATO's approach to counter hybrid threats is continuously broadening to include new types of hybrid threats and develop new responses to counter them.

The cognitive domain stands central to NATO's emerging approach to counter hybrid threats and is by some considered a key hybrid threats domain.²⁴

As stated by a recent study from NATO Supreme Allied Command Operations' Innovation Hub, "[b]ecause the factors that affect the cognitive domain can be involved in all aspects of human society through the areas of will, concept, psychology and thinking among other, so that particular kind of warfare penetrates into all fields of society. It can be foreseen that the future information warfare will start from the cognitive domain first, to seize the political and diplomatic strategic initiative, but it will also end in the cognitive realm."²⁵

NATO's 2020 NATO High-Level Reflection Group also proposed among its key recommendations that "NATO and Allies must develop more capabilities for operating in the cognitive and virtual dimensions, including at the tactical level."²⁶

²⁴ Gen Robert Brown, "US General Brown: 'Multi-Domain Operations,' Warfare, Perception Management. (TARGETED INDIVIDUALS)," streamed live on 3 March 2019, YouTube video, 13:21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahdSysH_pGw>

²⁵ François du Cluzel (2020): 'Cognitive Warfare', NATO Allied Command Transformation Innovation Hub, p. 36.

CP as a Hybrid Threat Challenge

Hostile activities towards CP always occur in tandem with other means of aggression. The question is how and to what extent the range of objects and sites broadly identified as "CP" may be exploited as a tool of coercion, domination and destabilisation within the range of conventional and non-conventional means that NATO addresses through the lens of hybrid threats. What are the various roles CP can play in hybrid threat scenarios, and how do they fit into NATO's approach to countering hybrid threats? How does the developing role of CP in conflicts look like from the hybrid threats lens?

Conceptual frameworks for increasing resilience against hybrid threats focus mostly on critical infrastructure, such as energy security and supply, space infrastructure, maritime security, public health, transport (aviation, maritime, rail), cyber security, communications, and financial systems. But "softer" vulnerabilities such as legitimacy, core values and liberties, societal cohesion and minorities rights have not yet been recognised and adequately protected against hybrid activities.

While not related to any conflict, the 2019 accidental fire that destroyed the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris offers an example to start from. Many immediate reactions suspected that the fire was an arson attack by jihadists. The overwhelming global reaction to the fire, the intense broadcasting by regular media and social media fuelling strong emotional responses, including the instantly pledged USD 1 Billion from private donations for reconstruction, indicates the socio-political power of CP.

From a hybrid threats perspective, the question is what kind of response the Notre-Dame fire could

²⁶ 'NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General', 25 November 2020, p. 46. <https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf>

have warranted if an armed group or even a foreign power stood behind it. Perhaps as part of a broader subtle campaign including funding of right-wing organisations, cyber-attacks, terrorist attacks, information campaigns.

What if the fire had been an arson attack by a group with links to a major para-military power, and that it was accompanied by synchronised hostile activities across Europe, including cyber-attacks, fake news campaigns, violation of airspace, and desecration of monuments and places of worship?

If that had been the case, the images of the Notre Dame ruin would no doubt have sparked strong emotional responses and become icons of a conflict escalation. It would have generated uncertainty, and a feeling of insecurity in France as well as in Europe and beyond, and it would have triggered security responses at the highest level. It is not unthinkable that the event by itself or in combination with other hostile actions could have led to military responses and involved NATO.

Places of significant cultural value thus present us with a societal vulnerability. They are often easily accessible and easily destroyable places of great symbolic, spiritual, and political value. Yet, to constitute a vulnerability in the context of hybrid warfare, CP does not need to be as prominent as Notre Dame. What counts is that the effect of threatening, misappropriating, destroying, or attacking an object or place has an observable weight on security and stability. In other words, the effect must be of such an intensity that it reverberates with other conventional and non-conventional means.

CP: A Cognitive Doman Issue

From a hybrid threat perspective, the impact that hostile misappropriation, manipulation, destruction or attacking of CP may have on people is another valuable hybrid tool in the cognitive domain. Attacks on and manipulation of CP and its use for propaganda, mobilisation

purposes, or undermining political cohesion by amplifying divisions exploits the symbolic and emotional quality of CP as a shortcut for the mass consciousness, collective sentiments, and group identity.

Furthermore, CP also typically provides the physical infrastructure for the organisation of everyday cultural and spiritual life and mindset of groups and nations. A terrorist attack on, say, a church may thus all at once disrupt critical parts of local life, spark the outbreak of further violence, trigger global reactions, and be used to muster funds and terrorist recruits. The propaganda and mobilising power of circulating iconic images of destroyed places of significant cultural importance on social media should not be underestimated. The effects of targeting CP as a cognitive domain element tend to reverberate across local, national and global cognitive spheres.

Global news cycles and social media play a critical role by mainstreaming and dispersing images of destruction of CP with the potential of triggering strong emotions and reactions among even the people living far from a conflict zone. Images of destruction travel easily on social media compared to human atrocities, which get filtered out.

Similarly, combat related collateral damage to CP, no matter how unintentional, may entail considerable and complex strategic and tactical implications compared to collateral damage to places or objects without emotional timbre.

In that way we may say that CP spans the three hybrid threats domains:

- 1) the physical domain, as moveable and immovable CP are physical places, things, objects, constructions;
- 2) the digital domain, as social media and constitute a main platform for spreading information and images of CP destructions;
- 3) and the cognitive domain, that can be said to constitute the 'main target area'.

The overall effect of the impact of hostile misappropriation, manipulation, destruction or attacking of CP will depend not only on its generally perceived value but also, and perhaps more important, on the political context. In an already tense situation, destruction or desecration of even less (emotionally) significant objects and places may polarise, destabilise, demoralise, fuel minority discontent, spark conflict escalation, spread confusion (about who did it), and mobilise support among followers.

The effects of manipulation and destruction of CP as part of strategic cultural engineering as part of territorial conquest, like we see it in for instance Russian hostile involvement in Ukraine, are even harder to predict. Just like the value of CP escapes definitions, the effects of playing CP as a tool of hybrid warfare must be considered unpredictable and entirely contingent on the immediate political context.

Cases

The following section develops an empirically informed framing of CP as a hybrid threats issue. To this aim, it canvasses a range of examples of how adversaries in most recent conflicts or conflict prone disputes have used CP for various strategic and/or tactical purposes. Some of the cases fall within NATO geographical areas of interest; some of them not. The purpose is to cast a global net and establish a global impression of the various ways that states and non-states actors in recent years have “played” the CP card in conflicts or grey zone confrontational activities. The selection of cases is neither exhaustive nor are the cases examined in depth.

Kosovo

The 1990 Balkan wars were fueled partly by claims to historical ownership over cultural landscapes and property. The systematic targeting of CP is well described as a ‘weapon of war’ including as a tool of ethnic cleansing. Religious and cultural sites were intentionally destroyed or desecrated. During the Siege of Sarajevo in 1992, Bosnian Serbs shelled the Library in Sarajevo and most of its collection was lost in flames. The year before, the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) shelled the Croatan coastal town Dubrovnik, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In Kosovo, even 20 years after NATO’s intervention, CP challenges remain extremely complicated, and one of the three main reasons for sustained multinational military presence (KFOR). Serbia maintains that Kosovo is “the

cradle of both the Serbian state and church, as well as of the spiritual home of the centuries-old culture of the Serbian people.”²⁷ The disputes related to Serbian Orthodox heritage sites in Kosovo, which according to Serbia amounts to 1,300 churches, monasteries, and other sites comprising Serbia’s cultural heritage, has been and remains central to peace negotiations and Kosovo’s settlement agreements.

The CP disputes are upheld and manipulated to sustain political tensions and destabilise and derail the peace process and Kosovo’s aspiration to become a nation. They are intentionally and effectively, yet subtly upheld by Serbian interests in destabilising Kosovo. What is more, Russian Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans is in competition with the European Union and the United States, and the Russian Orthodox Church plays a lead role in supporting Serbia’s cause and the Serbian Orthodox Church’s use of narratives and disputes about CP to destabilise Kosovo ‘from within’.²⁸

NATO’s 1999 bombing campaign of Kosovo and Serbia did not involve any reported collateral damage on CP.²⁹ The operation became the first operation where allied nations deployed to an operational environment where CP played a major role. International forces swiftly deployed to protect major patrimonial sites. As of 2022, KFOR still guards the Visoki Decani Monastery, the Head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. The key objective of NATO’s attention to, and protection of, CP in Kosovo is about preventing that hostile acts toward CP ignites the volatile situation. And it is about engaging with a

²⁷ Tamara Rastovac Siamasvili, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Serbia to UNESCO (2020): ‘Serbian cultural and religious heritage in Kosovo and Metohija’, *New Europe*, 16. Sept 2019. <<https://www.neweurope.eu/article/serbian-cultural-and-religious-heritage-in-kosovo-and-metohija>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

²⁸ See Maxim Samorukov (2019): ‘A Spoiler in the Balkans? Russia and the Final Resolution of the Kosovo Conflict’, paper. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Mira Milosevich (2020): ‘Russia’s Weaponization of Tradition: The Case of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro’, blog post.

Washington: Center for International and Strategic Studies. <<https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-weaponization-tradition-case-orthodox-church-montenegro>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022); Megan Duffy and Samuel Green (2020): ‘Organised Chaos: Russian influence and the state of disinformation in the Western Balkans’. The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University <<https://sites.tufts.edu/murrowcenter/organised-chaos/>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

²⁹ Serbia reported damage to the Yugoslav Defence Ministry building in Belgrade.

topic that stands at the core of the negotiations about Kosovo's settlement.

Afghanistan

The opening of the NATO conflict with Taliban in 2001 included Taliban's monumental destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. The destruction should not be reduced to an act of religious iconoclasm. It was a rational exploitation of CP to make a statement to the international community. As described by the then United Nations Regional Coordinator, "An isolated regime, which had foisted itself on its own population and was being encouraged by al-Qaida to take on the world, had found a brilliant source of international publicity where it could strike a successful pose of defiance. Western condemnation made it even more important for the confrontationist leadership to go ahead with the destruction."³⁰

Ahead of the destruction, UNESCO, United Nations, number of states, and world leading Museums not only condemned the plan. High-level international representatives instigated direct dialogues with Taliban and major countries even offered to evacuate the Buddhas. Eventually, the Taliban really had no choice but to destroy the Buddhas in order not to lose reputation. An unpleasant truth about the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas is that those who wanted to protect the buddhas inadvertently contributed to their fate.³¹ The more the international community focused on saving the Buddhas, the more useful they became for the

Taliban as a tool of strategic communication and propaganda.

The international military operations in Afghanistan brought fewer reports about challenges with CP than Iraq. Afghanistan was less urbanised, but most of its ancient sites and historical monuments had also been plundered, damaged, or erased during the Soviet invasion (1979 – 1992) and subsequent Mujahadin rule.³² Today, militants continue to attack mosques and other places of worship³³ to impose their ideology and terrorise the civilian population. And as in many other conflicts, looting of antiquities and illicit trafficking has over the years played its part in the conflict economy.³⁴

Iraq

Iraq became the second large military operation where a NATO member state faced severe challenges regarding CP. The unprevented looting of the Baghdad Museum in 2003 caused some backlash against the U.S. forces stationed in the immediate vicinity of the Museum. The troops lacked instructions or training on how to handle such situations, and therefore eventually abstained from intervening.³⁵ The incident impacted negatively on the reputation of the U.S. among Iraqis, in the broader Middle East and in the international community.

Today, almost 20 years after, the case is still frequently brought up by commentators and academics.³⁶ Similarly, failure to secure historic

³⁰ Michael Semple (2011): 'Why the Buddhas of Bamian were destroyed', Guest Blog, Afghan Analyst Network, 2 Mar 2011. <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/context-culture/guest-blog-why-the-buddhas-of-bamian-were-destroyed/>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

³¹ Centlivres, Pierre, 2009. 'The Death of the Buddhas of Bamiyan', in Middle East Institute Viewpoints: Afghanistan, 1979-2009: In the Grip of Conflict, pp. 26–28; Lynn Meskell (2015): 'Gridlock: UNESCO, global conflict and failed ambitions', *World Archaeology*, 47:2, 225-238; Frederik Rosén (2021): 'The dark side of cultural heritage protection', *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 27(4), pp. 495-510.

³² Gil J. Stein (2015): 'The War-Ravaged Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan: An Overview of Projects of Assessment, Mitigation, and Preservation', *Near Eastern Archaeology*, Vol. 78, No. 3, pp. 187-195; Nancy Hatch Dupree (2002): 'Cultural heritage and national identity in Afghanistan', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 23, No 5, pp 977-989.

³³ In 2019, "Taliban fighters stormed several security posts providing protection to Afghanistan's historic minaret of Jam, cutting access to the UNESCO World Heritage Site and killing 18 members of security forces" (Taliban raid near historic minaret kills 18 members of Afghan forces, TRT World, 29. May 2019. <<https://www.trtworld.com/asia/taliban-raid-near-historic-minaret-kills-18-members-of-afghan-forces-27090>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

³⁴ Peter Campbell (2013): 'The Illicit Antiquities Trade as a Transnational Criminal Network: Characterizing and Anticipating Trafficking of Cultural Heritage', *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol. 20, 2, pp. 120-122.

³⁵ See Lawrence Rothfield (2009): *The Rape of Mesopotamia. Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³⁶ Sigal Samuel (2018): 'It's Disturbingly Easy to Buy Iraq's Archeological Treasures-U.S. forces invaded the country 15

sites in the ancient city of Babylon backfired on the mission. The damage caused by the U.S. marines deployed to protect the site, resulted in bad international press and further resentment among Iraqis and coalition partners across the Arab world.³⁷

CP also posed severe military challenges with patrimonial sites during urban fighting. The issue of striking a mosque or a minaret is so sensitive in the Arab world that they provide effective shelters for hiding fighters, weapons, or place snipers. Returning incoming enemy fire from a minaret with destructive power may turn the locals against you. In that way fighters exploited the legal status and normative power of patrimonial sites in a form of lawfare, as well as local sentiments and attitudes. It is not so much about CP as such, but more about its cognitive background: in an already tense environment, even a small spark can inflame an uncontrollable situation.

Similarly, the U.S. forces learned not to hit patrimonial sites in fear of creating resentment among Iraqis, an issue that gave rise to the concept of “the sniper in the minaret-dilemma.”³⁸ On the other hand, placing one’s own snipers or even spotters in a minaret, even if it offers a tactical advantage, is against LOAC. It may also attract enemy fire and escalate violence and thus lead to a situation that could compromise the mission.

To handle these challenges, in 2005 the U.S. military adopted Rules of Engagement related to places of worship and religious sites. The RoE instructed commanders to “consider political and

cultural sensitivities when planning and executing operations that impact upon religious property.”³⁹ Among other things, the RoE specified that “US Forces will not enter mosques without the approval of the CDR, MND-B (senior regional commander) in coordination with MOD and MOI (the Iraqi ministries of defense and interior)” and that “CDR, CENTCOM must approve any preplanned kinetic engagements of religious buildings or mosques.”⁴⁰

Altogether, the U.S. military’s operations in Iraq substantiated that CP forms an essential aspect of the security environment and that CP and its protection can constitute an important element in strategic, operational, and tactical considerations.

Libya

Libya stands as a turning point in NATO’s approach to CP. Following the Qadhafi regime’s targeting of civilians in February 2011, NATO answered the United Nations’ (UN) call to protect the Libyan people. In March 2011, a coalition of NATO Allies and partners launched the Operation Unified Protector (OUP) (24.05—31.10 2011) to enforce an arms embargo, maintain a no-fly zone, and engage airpower to protect civilians. NATO took over the command of OUP on 31. March 2011.

During the planning phase of OUP, the Joint Force Command Naples received data on CP in Libya from Operation ODYSSEY DAWN (the American contribution to the pre-OUP operation), UNESCO, academia, and other sources. It has not been verified whether the externally-provided expert information found its way to the sharp-end decision-making support. Yet operational

years ago this week—and left behind a booming trade in looted artifacts’, *The Atlantic*, MARCH 19, 2018. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/iraq-war-archeology-invasion/555200/>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

³⁷ Rory McCarty (2005): ‘Babylon wrecked by war. US-led forces leave a trail of destruction and contamination in architectural site of world importance’, *Guardian*, 15. Jan 2015. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jan/15/iraq.arts1>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022); ‘Ancient city of Babylon designated Unesco World Heritage Site’, BBC News 5. July 2019 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48888893>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

³⁸ Corn, Geoffrey S., ‘Snipers in the Minaret - What is the Rule? The Law of War and the Protection of CP: A Complex Equation’, *Army Law*, Vol. 28, July 2005; U.S. National Public Radio – NPR (2020): ‘In Iraq, Authorities Continue To Fight Uphill Battle Against Antiquities Plunder’ August 20, 2020 <<https://www.npr.org/2020/08/20/886540260/in-iraq-authorities-continue-to-fight-uphill-battle-against-antiquities-plunder?t=1613571467924>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

³⁹ ANNEX E (CONSOLIDATED ROE) TO 3-187 FRAGO 02, OPOD 02-005, 3.E.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.E.(4)

planners at OUP evidently paid attention to CPP and avoided harm to CP.

It was afterwards noticed by NATO that “NATO forces’ performance with regard to avoiding damage to CP in Libya was well received by academia and in the media.”⁴¹ The NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC) was therefore tasked to review CPP during OUP and establish recommendations for NATO on CPP.⁴²

The JALLC emphasised the praise and positive press coverage NATO received from performing well on “CPP.” The international NGO cultural advocacy community clearly had an interest in pointing at OUP as a case that demonstrated why their cause mattered, and they called upon NATO and others to do more. Equally, had NATO damaged CP, it would presumably have received critique from the international advocacy community, the press, as well as have offered pro-Ghaddafi and NATO-critical positions an opportunity to discredit NATO.

The lessons identified by JALLC regarding OUP, CPP and NATO’s reputation are relevant for understanding of CP as a strategic communication element that may bleed into the hybrid threats agenda. It is easy to imagine how manipulation through images showing destroyed CP could be used as effective disinformation.

Syria, Iraq and Daesh

The fight against Daesh in Syria and Iraq became a main driver for the current international

attention to CP in relation to armed conflict. Daesh’ systematic targeting of CP in Syria and Iraq as a means of domination, coercion and provocation is well described and their vigorous use of social media to showcase destruction proved a purpose beyond iconoclasm.⁴³ Daesh effectively employed CP destructions as a tool for establishing the visual narrative⁴⁴ about their identity, goals, and strength.

By attacking CP, Daesh succeeded in creating intense media coverage with dramatic frontpage images of destroyed sites in lead newspapers across the world. Daesh effectively employed CP destructions to draw attention from Heads of States, International Organisations, and even the UN Security Council. Often, international organisations would record and instantly distribute images of destruction thereby unintentionally supporting the Daesh media campaign.⁴⁵

By destroying sites at Palmyra, Daesh created images that triggered an enormous response across the world. Russia entered the scene and supported the Assad-regime with liberating Palmyra from Daesh⁴⁶, and showcased the liberation with a “dazzling concert”⁴⁷ performed at the site, in the middle of the conflict zone, and presenting Putin as the *Great Savoir* of World Heritage.⁴⁸

Daesh learned that the cognitive power of CP could be played strategically to communicate power way beyond the physical conflict zone, and

⁴¹ NATO (2012): ‘CP Protection in the Operations Planning Process’, JALLC/CG/12/285 (NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre, 20 December 2012), p. 1.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Clapperton, M., Jones, DM & Smith, MLR (2017). ‘Iconoclasm and strategic thought: Islamic State and cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria’, *International Affairs* 93:5, 1206–1231; Helen Turku (2017). *The destruction of CP as a weapon of war: ISIS in Syria and Iraq*. Springer.

⁴⁴ Rhys Crilley, Ilan Manor & Corneliu Bjola (2020): Visual narratives of global politics in the digital age: an introduction, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 33, 5.

⁴⁵ Frederik Rosén: (2020): ‘The dark side of cultural heritage protection’, *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 27(4), pp. 495-510.

⁴⁶ Gertjan Pletz (2017): ‘Violins and trowels for Palmyra: Post-conflict heritage politics’, *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 33, 4, pp. 18–22.

⁴⁷ Leonid Bershidsky (2016): ‘Putin Strikes a Defiant Note in Palmyra. A dazzling concert in Syria sends a message of intent at home and abroad’, *Bloomberg* 6. maj 2016 < <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-05-06/putin-stages-a-post-modern-show-in-palmyra> > (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

⁴⁸ BBC (2016): ‘Palmyra concert: Celebration of liberation or Putin propaganda’, 5. May 2016 < <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-36219087> > (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

CP became central to Daesh's carefully executed planned media campaigns.⁴⁹ Daesh will be remembered for their atrocities but also for their well-staged attacks on World Heritage sites. Images of dynamited CP became a hallmark symbol of the movement. They caused outrage among their adversaries and thereby mobilised their own followers.

Daesh's exploitation of and the international attention to CP brought implications to the Coalition Forces. Decision-making support for the air campaign took great care to circumnavigate CP. They engaged extensive databases with geospatial information (GIS) on CP and sometimes consulted museum professionals to gather information about operational areas to avoid damaging CP.⁵⁰

The rationality was to protect but even more to balance the potential bad press and social media effect of damaging CP. A mishit by the Coalition would have been a gift to Daesh propaganda machinery as well as to their supporters, but also to other critics of the western military powers, including Syria, Russia, and Iran.

Mali

Ansar-Dine destroyed shrines and patrimonial sites in Bamako to display power and attack the international community. It is well described how jihadi groups exploited the growing discontent in Mali about the western influence on Mali's CP, including World Heritage Sites, which had become symbols of the divide between Mali's small, privileged ruling classes and their Western

affinities, and Mali's poor population.⁵¹ Ansar-Dine succeeded in drawing enormous international attention by destroying CP and staging it largely as social media performances.

Subsequently, the International Criminal Court prosecuted the destruction and sentenced the perpetrators.

The case of Ansar-Dine demonstrates how simple (smashing mud bricks with a sledgehammer) destruction with no human casualties can generate destabilising political effects to a conflict. The focus on CP created a great deal of confusion to the already overstretched UN Peace keeping mission, which struggled with the expectations enshrined in its new mandate to protect CP due to lack of training, knowledge and directives.⁵²

Ukraine / Crimea

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 has been described as "the greatest challenge for the post-Cold War European security architecture."⁵³ It sparked a reorganisation of NATO priorities and a return to collective defence as the main planning paradigm.

From the beginning, the cultural dimension stood central to the annexation and the ensuing conflict with Ukraine. While invoking international law and the obligation to protect Russian minority groups in Crimea, the arguments for annexing the Crimea Peninsula also included arguments about heritage and the 'true ownership' of the Peninsula and its cultural landscape. As Putin declared, "in our hearts it was always ours"⁵⁴ and

⁴⁹ Isakhan, B., & González Zarandona, JA. (2018). 'Layers of religious and political iconoclasm under the Islamic State: Symbolic sectarianism and pre-monotheistic iconoclasm', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 24:1, 1-16.; Cunliffe, E., & Curini, L. (2018). ISIS and heritage destruction: A sentiment analysis. *Antiquity*, 92(364), 1094-1111.

⁵⁰ US Defense Intelligence Agency, GIS Technical Workshop, NATO Science for Peace and Security Advanced Research SPS CPP, 1-2 September 2016, New York, USA.

⁵¹ Joy, Charlotte, 2016. 'UNESCO is What? World Heritage, Militant Islam and the Search for a Common Humanity in Mali'. In: Christoph Brumann and David Berliner (ed.): *World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives*. London: Berghahn, pp. 60-77.

⁵² Leloup, M. (2019). 'Heritage Protection as Stabilization, the Emergence of a New 'Mandated Task' for UN Peace Operations', *International Peacekeeping*, 26:4, 408-430.

⁵³ Michael Rühle, *Head, Hybrid Challenges and Energy Security, in NATO's Emerging Security Challenges Division*, (2019): NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats, November 05, 2019. <https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/11/05/natos_response_to_hybrid_threats_114832.html> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

⁵⁴ Thor Stebelsky (2018): 'A tale of two regions: geopolitics, identities, narratives, and conflict in Kharkiv and the Donbas', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 59:1, 28-50, p. 29.

"[Crimea] is a native Russian land and Sevastopol – a Russian city."⁵⁵

Part of the Russian Image of the situation involves the notion that Crimea and Sevastopol "are totally unique for Russia and for Russian culture" because of the number of leading Russian writers and artists "who lived and created here".⁵⁶

As argued by commentators, the Russian narrative stressed the historical and cultural links between Crimea and Russian, and Putin the person who united Russian territories and peoples based on a cultural/spiritual conception of the "Russian world."⁵⁷ It has been noticed that Crimea "had a powerful affective appeal to ordinary Russians both as a storied sacred place in Russian history and as a beloved vacation spot that held happy memories for many people."⁵⁸

Immediately after the annexation, the new State Council of Crimea adopted the "Law on the Sites of the Crimean Cultural Heritage," declaring Russian ownership over all museum artefacts and cultural monuments of Crimea. Russia also passed a law authorising swifter adoption of Crimean CP in Russian museum registries. Furthermore, Russia inscribed more than 220 Ukrainian cultural sites on the Russian list of important Russian cultural heritage, including churches, mosques, and historical monuments and places.

A 2021 UNESCO report concludes that "Russia has appropriated Ukrainian cultural property on the peninsula, including 4,095 national and local monuments under state protection" and that

"Russia uses such appropriation to implement its comprehensive long-term strategy to strengthen its historical, cultural and religious dominance over the past, present and future of Crimea."⁵⁹

Obviously, Russia did not want a situation like the Serbian Orthodox sites in Kosovo – with Ukrainian CP sites dotted all over the projected "new" Russian territory. But Russia also clearly used and continues to use the appropriation of CP to intimidate the Ukrainian communities. A situation where a nation claims ownership over and appropriates another nation's CP surely constitutes a strong symbolic act.

Russian activities related to CP, including places of worship, stir up strong emotions in Ukraine. One commentator describes the situation as "The Russian occupation authorities of the Crimea want to destroy or steal all true cultural treasures, while in their place monuments of dubious quality are erected to glorify 'Russia's greatness and power'. By these actions Russia attempts to delude the whole world that Crimea "has always been Russian," while "forgetting" that the peninsula was, is and will be the land of its indigenous people – the Crimean Tatars."⁶⁰

The concerns include the Russian "restoration" project on the Kahn's Palace of Bakhchissara, which does more harm than good, and which commentators view as a direct provocation against Ukraine and the Tartar minority. The Palace ranks among the most famous Muslim palaces found in Europe. Its importance for the Tartar minority and, more generally, a significant

⁵⁵ John Biersack & Shannon O'Lear (2014) "The geopolitics of Russia's annexation of Crimea: narratives, identity, silences, and energy", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 55:3, 247-269, 253.

⁵⁶ Sophia Kishkovsky (2018): 'Putin demands ramping-up of cultural hub in annexed Crimea', *The Art Newspaper*, 6 September 2018 <<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/09/06/putin-demands-ramping-up-of-cultural-hub-in-annexed-crimea>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

⁵⁷ John Biersack & Shannon O'Lear (2014): 'The geopolitics of Russia's annexation of Crimea: narratives, identity, silences,

and energy', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 55:3, 247-269, 252f

⁵⁸ Gerard Toal (2017): *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 251.

⁵⁹ UNESCO Executive Board, 212 EX/5.I.E (10 September 2021), p. 5.

⁶⁰ Elina Sulyma (2017): 'Russia methodically destroys and removes cultural treasures from occupied Crimea', *Euromaidan*, <<http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/06/09/russia-methodically-destroys-and-removes-cultural-treasures-from-occupied-crimea-euromaidan-press/>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

marker of pre-Russian Crimea, makes it a potent site for demonstrating dominance.

It also seems likely that Russia aims at subverting the Palace, a former centre of Islamic culture, congruent with Russia's ambition of establishing Crimea as one of the centres of Orthodox Christianity and culture in the Slavic world.⁶¹ In that regard, Russia also plans to establish a museum of Christianity in Ukraine's UNESCO World Heritage site, the Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese.⁶²

Altogether, we see an agreement among commentators that Russian authorities have sought to "wipe out Crimean Tatar culture, heritage, identity, and memory."⁶³

Evidence also indicates that in the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, new monuments "(...) are being constructed with themes and in locations that directly speak to key narratives found in Russian Information Operations, by the Russian government, Russian proxies, Russian-backed separatists, and private groups as a means to build legitimacy on contested territory."⁶⁴

The manipulation of CP clearly forms part of a strategy to strengthen Russia's strategy to establish historical, cultural and religious hegemony over Ukrainian regions. It underpins Russian foreign policy objectives and has been consciously played along other conventional and non-conventional means of coercion, domination, and destabilisation.

Lacking the speed and urgency normally associated with attacks and warfare, the sluggishness of cultural engineering, even under occupation, tends to fly under the military and security outlook. But Russia's long-term objectives will to some extent rely on their success with recasting the cultural-symbolic space of Crimean territory: "Cognitive warfare may well be the missing element that allows the transition from military victory on the battlefield to lasting political success."⁶⁵

From the perspective of the hybrid threats framework, in the case of Ukraine and Crimea, CP emerges as a tool employed not only for domination and destabilisation but also for destroying communities from within and reformatting Ukrainian regions through acts of cultural engineering.

The Ukrainian government and commentators have been slow in realising Russian strategies regarding CP in Ukraine. "Russia has really been one step ahead on this matter", as one Ukrainian expert put it.⁶⁶

It may be worth noticing that Russia has a tradition for including culture in its National Security Strategy. The 2009 Strategy mentions 'unlawful infringements against cultural objects' as one of the two 'main threats to national security in the cultural sphere'.⁶⁷ And the 2015 revised version mentions that the strengthening of national security in the sphere of culture is aided by 'the strengthening of state control over the condition of cultural heritage facilities (monuments of history and culture) and the

⁶¹ Cataryna Busul, 'Crimea's Occupation Exemplifies the Threat of Attacks on Cultural Heritage', Chatham House, 4 February 2020.

<<https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/crimea-s-occupation-exemplifies-threat-attacks-cultural-heritage>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022)

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Polina Sadovskaya and Veronika Pfeilschifter (2020): 'From Stalin to Putin: The Crimean Tatars face a new era of Kremlin persecution', Atlantic Council, 17. May.

⁶⁴ Damian Koropeczyk (2022): 'Cultural Heritage in Ukraine: a Gap in Russian IO Monitoring', *Small Wars Journal*, online.

<<https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/cultural-heritage-ukraine-gap-russian-io-monitoring>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

⁶⁵ François du Cluzel (2020): 'Cognitive Warfare', NATO Allied Command Transformation Innovation Hub, p. 36.

⁶⁶ 'The Occupation of Crimea and the Fate of Cultural Heritage: by Design or by Default?', Exploratory Workshop, The Nordic Center for Cultural Heritage and Armed Conflict and the Norwegian Institute in Rome, 23. November 2021.

⁶⁷ Russian Federation Presidential Edict 537, 12 May 2009 'On the Russian Federation's National Security Strategy Through 2020' (Sobraniye zakonodatelstva Rossiyskoy Federatsii, 2009, No. 20, Item 2444, para 80.

<<https://thailand.mid.ru/en/national-security-strategy-of-the-russian-federation>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

enhancement of responsibility for violating the demands of their preservation, utilization, and state protection'.⁶⁸ Belonging in longer sections on culture and security, these paragraphs reveal a Russian National Security perspective on the relationship between CP and security. Recent Russian practice in CP also shows this link.⁶⁹

[In comparison, the U.S. has no tradition for mentioning culture in their national security strategies although the most recent version mentions the preservation of 'cultural heritage' in connection with the protection of religious minorities.⁷⁰ This indicates a difference between the two superpowers in viewing the strategic role of CP in conflicts such as Ukraine.]

Nagorno-Karabakh

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh partly revolved around disputes of issues related to CP and territorial ownership.⁷¹ The significance of CP in the conflict between the two parties is revealed by a 2019 report that documents Azerbaijan's recent

destruction of 89 Armenian medieval churches, 5,840 Armenian intricate cross-stones, and 22,000 Armenian tombstones as an effort to delete Armenian cultural symbols in the region⁷² CP will without a doubt play a complicated role in the peace process.⁷³

Yemen

In Yemen, Yemeni CP has been intentionally targeted by the Saudi-led Arab coalition air strikes but also jihadist militants in what commentators have described as a systematic attempt to erase Yemeni cultural identity.⁷⁴

Cyprus

The destruction of heritage sites associated with or belonging to the other side was part of the intimate violence of the conflict. The traces are still visible in the landscape and issues related to both destroyed and existing CP, namely places of worship and religious monuments, which continues to play a contentious role in the Cyprus peace talks.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Russian Federation Presidential Edict 683, 31 December 2015, 'The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy', para 82. <<http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>> (accessed 20 Feb 2022).

⁶⁹ Mark Dunkley (2019): 'The Russian Weaponization of Cultural Heritage', *British Army Review*, pp. 18-31.

⁷⁰ See recent United States National Security Strategies of the United States of America, <<https://history.defense.gov/Historical-Sources/National-Security-Strategy/>> and the latest (2021) <<https://history.defense.gov/Historical-Sources/National-Security-Strategy/>> (accessed 20 Feb 2022).

⁷¹ Thomas de Waal (2020): 'Now comes a Karabakh war over cultural heritage', *Euroasianet*, 19. <<https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-now-comes-a-karabakh-war-over-cultural-heritage>> (accessed 20 Feb 2022); Sylvia Maus (2021): 'A Violent Effort to Rewrite History? Destruction of Religious Sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Concept of Cultural Genocide', *Völkerrechtsblog*, 19.04.2021. <<https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/a-violent-effort-to-rewrite-history/>> (accessed 20 Feb 2022).

⁷² Simon Maghakyan and Sarah Pickman (2019): 'A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture', *Hyperallergic*, February 18, 2019. <<https://hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture/>> (accessed 20 Feb 2022).

⁷³ Hugh Eakin (2020): 'When an Enemy's Cultural Heritage Becomes One's Own. Could the cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh

offer new hope for the preservation of threatened monuments everywhere?', *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2020; Thomas de Waal (2020): 'Now comes a Karabakh war over cultural heritage. Fears are growing in particular for Armenian monuments being handed over', *Euroasianet*, Nov 16, 2020 <<https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-now-comes-a-karabakh-war-over-cultural-heritage>> (accessed 20 Feb 2022).

⁷⁴ Dammaj, E. 2020: 'The degradation of history: Violations committed by the warring parties against Yemen's cultural property'. Paper presented at the International Conference on Handling of Cultural Goods and Financing of Political Violence, Online via the Norwegian Institute in Rome, 22nd-23rd October; 'Saudi raids destroy Yemen World Heritage sites', *Middle East Monitor*, May 6, 2020. <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200506-saudi-raids-destroy-yemen-world-heritage-sites/>> (accessed 20 Feb 2022); Lamya Khalidi (2017): 'The Destruction of Yemen and Its Cultural Heritage', *International Journal Middle East Studies* 49, pp. 736–739; Benjamin Isakah & Lynn Meskell (2020): 'UNESCO, world heritage and the gridlock over Yemen', *Third World Quarterly* 41(194), pp. 1-16; Jeffrey S. Bachman (2019) A 'synchronised attack' on life: the Saudi-led coalition's 'hidden and holistic' genocide in Yemen and the shared responsibility of the US and UK, *Third World Quarterly*, 40:2, 298-316

⁷⁵ Communiqué on the Occasion of the International Day for Monuments and Sites "Shared Culture, Shared Heritage, Shared Responsibility" 18 April 2020, The Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process under the Auspices of the Embassy of Sweden (RTCYPP), <<https://www.religioustrack.com/2020/04/18/18-april-2020-international-day-for-monuments-and-sites-shared-culture-shared-heritage-shared-responsibility/>> (accessed 20 Feb 2022); Costas M. Constantinou, Olga Demetriou & Mete Hatay (2012): *Conflicts and Uses of Cultural Heritage in Cyprus*,

Israel-Palestine

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict presents us with decades of endless examples of disputes related to the definition of and ownership over CP as a conflict driver and flashpoints for outbreaks of violence. For instance, the second intifada was sparked partly by Palestinian discontent about the then Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, going on what they considered an intentionally provocative visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem on 28 September 2000.⁷⁶ Both sides of the conflict consciously manipulate CP to shape perceptions, alter consciousness, stir up emotions of citizens and decision-makers, and shape conflict patterns and public and international opinions.⁷⁷

Asia

Southeast Asia has the world's highest prevalence of conflict-related attacks against CP⁷⁸ – a forgotten dimension of security in Asia.

During the recent conflict in Myanmar, mosques, madrasas (Muslim religious schools) and historical places have been systematically destroyed as part of a state-sanctioned Buddhist targeting of the Rohingya-community. The International Court of Justice ruled in January 2020 that Myanmar must take steps to prevent further genocidal acts by its own forces or by groups or forces acting within its territory,⁷⁹ thus

reinforcing the allegation that destruction of CP formed part of a genocide.⁸⁰

The Hindu-Muslim and INDO-PAK conflicts continuously revolve around places of significant cultural value and worship, providing plenty of examples that show us how destruction of CP can trigger unrest and the outbreak of violence, with ambiguous connections between state level and “local” incidents. A recent pilot study found that violence mostly escalates after attacks on religious places⁸¹, most dramatically exemplified by the destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque in 1992, which sparked off riots between Muslims and Hindus that claimed the death of an estimated 2000 people, and subsequent riots claiming some 1.000 deaths. The Kashmir conflict continuously involves destruction of CP (shrines, mosques).⁸²

Altogether, CP progressively plays a role in India as a reference for skirmishes, conflicts, and outbreak of violence, viz. as security reference objects and focal points for in-group rhetoric justifying violence based on self-defense by communities “under threat.”

In the South China Sea dispute, China has used underwater heritage to support its territorial claims over the South China Sea and its offshore resources. As stated by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Archaeological Findings Prove That Chinese People Are the Real Owners of the South China Sea Islands” and that “China has sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and

Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, 14:2, 177-198; (2009) ‘Cyprus: Destruction of Cultural Property in the Northern Part of Cyprus and Violations of International Law’, report. Washington: The Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Center.

⁷⁶ Jeremy Pressman (2006): ‘The Second Intifada: Background and Causes of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict’, *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 23(2), pp. 114–141.

⁷⁷ David Keane and Valentina Azarov (): ‘UNESCO, Palestine and Archeology in Conflict’, *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, Vol. 41, 3, pp. 309–343.

⁷⁸ Croicu, M & Kreutz, J (2020): ‘Where do cultures clash? A cross-national investigation of attacks on religious sites.’ Working paper. Uppsala University.

⁷⁹ International Court of Justice, Order, Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar) (Jan. 23, 2020).

⁸⁰ Anne-Laura Kraak (2018): ‘Heritage destruction and cultural rights: insights from Bagan in Myanmar’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 24:9, 998-1013; Ronan Lee & José Antonio González Zarandona (2020): ‘Heritage destruction in Myanmar's Rakhine state: legal and illegal iconoclasm’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26:5, 519-538; Afroza Anwary (2020): ‘Interethnic Conflict and Genocide in Myanmar’, *Homicide Studies*, 24,1, page(s): 85-102.

⁸¹ Mihai Croicu & Joakim Kreutz (2020): ‘Where do cultures clash? A cross-national investigation of attacks on religious sites.’ Uppsala University Working paper.

⁸² Masood Kahn (2020): talk, Institute for Strategic Studies, Islamabad and Middle East Monitor (2020) ‘Kashmir & Palestine: The destruction of indigenous cultural heritage’, webinar, 11. September 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkNqRm29wTU>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

the adjacent waters and enjoys relevant rights and interests there based on history.”⁸³ In 2016, an international tribunal rejected China’s claim to historical rights over the sea⁸⁴, yet China’s disagreement continues to place heritage arguments as part of the dispute about the South Chinese Sea.⁸⁵ CP creates a strong basis for creating a narrative in the popular consciousness and winning support not least at home.

Global Violent Extremism

Over the last decades, terrorist attacks have, in addition to civilian infrastructure (airports, train stations, etc.), increasingly targeted places of cultural significance and worship (mosques, shrines, churches, synagogues, cultural places and events).

The attack in New York on 11. September 2001 on the World Trade Center exploited the cultural significance of the Twin Towers to create an atrocious but also iconic event, which shook the entire world order. 20 years after, the effect of the attack still haunts global security.

Since then, we have seen attacks on a national celebration day (Nice), concert venues (Paris, Manchester), a Christmas market (Berlin), among other places, as well as an increase of attacks on places of worship.

For terrorists, crowded areas are easy to find, but the cultural and/or spiritual significance of CP adds an additional and powerful layer that installs the attack in the potent and transnational domain of cultural or religious belonging.

Moreover, places of worship are often soft targets with regular cycles of gatherings, like mass every Sunday, making planning of attacks easy.

The rising Jihadist movements in Asia already have a history of targeting places of worship. In African conflicts, extremists’ attacks on churches are on a steep rise. For instance, since 2018, Ethiopia has seen systematic attacks on churches as well as mosques, a phenomenon entirely new to Ethiopia. The development is associated with the expansion of Islamic extremism in the region and has triggered waves of discontent and protests across Ethiopia. Attacks on churches stir up and intensify age-old tensions between Islam and Christianity – also beyond Ethiopia.

⁸³ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines (2016): ‘Archaeological Findings Prove That Chinese People Are Real Owner of South China Sea Islands’, 2016/06/15. < <http://ph.china-embassy.org/eng/sgdt/t1372445.htm>> (Accessed 22. Feb 2022).

⁸⁴ “The Republic of the Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China”. Permanent Court of Arbitration, PCA Case No 2013-19, 12. June 2016; see also Perez-Alvaro, E., & Forrest, C. (2018): ‘Maritime Archaeology and Underwater Cultural Heritage in the

Disputed South China Sea’, *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 25(3), 375-401.

⁸⁵ See Yingying Jing & Juan Li (2019): ‘Who Owns Underwater Cultural Heritage in the South China Sea’, *Coastal Management*, 47:1, 107-126; Adams, Jeff (2013): ‘The Role of Underwater Archaeology in Framing and Facilitating the Chinese National Strategic Agenda’, in Blumenfield, T. and Silverman (ed.): *Cultural Heritage Politics in China*. New York: Springer, pp. 261–82.

Summing Up

The above-mentioned examples demonstrate how the misappropriation, manipulation, and destruction of CP can and are being employed in various ways as a tool of coercion, domination, and destabilisation in connection with armed conflicts and hostile grey-zone activities.

The examples represent different conflict modalities and geographical areas. Yet they have many things in common, namely that the hostile engagements with CP mostly exploit the potential of CP to stir up strong emotions, even in places remote from the incident.

The destruction of CP can be used to escalate violence and tensions more than destruction of infrastructure because it mobilises strong emotions. Culturally significant places are often “soft targets” with regular gatherings of many people. The symbolic effect of killing people during worship in the house of a god supposed to protect them can make a much stronger statement than attacking public space.

Looking across recent iconic destructions of CP (Bamiyan, Timbuktu Shrines, Palmyra) by jihadist groups reveals that such acts cannot be reduced to religious iconoclasm. Rather the jihadists exploited the social power of CP for strategic communication purposes. In addition, the destructions involved an escalation of political tension between the jihadists and the international community. In all cases, the international attention evidently contributed to the escalation and thus offered the jihadists an opportunity.

Destruction, misappropriation, or manipulation of CP increasingly stands central to territorial disputes as a part of or correlated to kinetic and grey area hostile activities. Such activities often form part of a broader strategy of transforming the history and ownership of a territory, as part

of a strategy to recast the cognitive dimension of the geopolitical configuration of conquered or disputed territory, viz. “geopolitical engineering.”

Opponents also place ownership issues over CP, including landscapes of significant cultural value, at the heart of claims to territories and military aggression. Claims to heritage and original cultural ownership are more likely to gain popular political traction than claims to ownership over natural resources or military strategic locations.

The misappropriation, manipulation, and destruction of CPP may be carried out without any immediate bodily injury to human beings. Planners and perpetrators may view their engagement in such acts as morally uncomplicated or may even feel morally obligated due to ideological or religious belief.

An important observation is that NATO’s (and Allied Nations) compartmentalisation of “Cultural Property Protection” in NATO along Human Security issues, with an emphasis on protection and the physicality of CP, tends to obscure the nature of the hybrid challenges related to CP the alliance may face regarding CP and its cognitive domain character. NATO (and Allied Nations) could therefore benefit from a more elaborate approach to CP in the domain of Hybrid Threats and NATO’s general strategic awareness.

In that regard, a lesson from the cases is also that it needs to be considered how political concerns, namely those voiced from authoritative organisations, may contribute to popularizing CP as “a weapon of war”: The more we speak about the value of CP and the importance of protecting it, the more useful it can become for armed groups, terrorists, and states to target it. For NATO it means that addressing CP protection issues may simply empower adversaries use of CP as a tool of hybrid warfare.

Background of report

This report was originally prepared for the NATO Science for Peace and Security Project G5645, “NATO and Cultural Property: Embracing New Challenges on the Battlefield” (2020 – 2021, eventually cancelled due to COVID-19), which followed the NATO Science for Peace and Security Project G4866, “Best Practices for Cultural Property Protection in NATO-led Military Operations” (2014 – 2017). The projects were directed by the Nordic Center for Cultural Heritage and Armed Conflict (CHAC).

The NATO Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme promotes dialogue and practical cooperation between NATO member states and partner countries based on scientific research, technological innovation and knowledge exchange.

All SPS projects approved for funding have been thoroughly evaluated for their scientific merit and security impact by NATO experts, independent scientists and NATO member countries in the Partnerships and Cooperative Security Committee (PCSC).

The report has been developed in dialogue with and benefited from inputs from the community of interest.