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What Makes Communication Strategic?: — Preparing Military Organizations for the Battle of Ideas

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RESEARCH PAPER

What Makes Communication Strategic? – Preparing Military Organizations for the Battle of Ideas

by Jan Techau[1]

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The Culture Shock of Strategic Communication

Two intellectual concepts have dominated Western military thinking in the first decade of the 21st century. One is the "Comprehensive Approach" (CA), i.e. the integration of civilian and military action to improve the outcome of crisis management and interventions. The other is "Strategic Communication" (SC), i.e. the systematic incorporation of communication (in its broadest sense) into the arsenal of the armed forces. In both cases, confusion as to what these concepts mean, both in theory and practice, remains profound. Numerous articles, policy papers and official handbooks have been published on both without bringing full clarity to the matter. This confusion is exacerbated by the fact that both concepts, despite the incoherence of their doctrinal foundations, are in frequent use in the field, creating a wealth of rather heterogeneous practical experience that does not easily yield to systematic analysis[2].

Both concepts have caused substantial culture shocks within the military. The CA not only forces the military to accept that they alone can't bring about victory any longer (a claim that goes directly to the core of the military's professional pride), it also asks them to accept that some of the core elements of the traditional military craft might even be obstacles to winning victory. Similarly, Strategic Communication asks the military to embrace as valuable a discipline it has traditionally deemed either to be strictly technological (as in "signals") or to be of secondary importance, and which it has mostly been rather bad at: pro-active, long-term, transparent communication.

SC means the military is asked not only to change its attitude about communication, but also to make it a central element of its everyday thinking and working, i.e. to accept that communication is as valuable as the military battle itself. The structurally conservative military environments with their emphasis on secrecy and opaqueness have found this hard to accomplish. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, militaries have persistently shown more interest in battlefield dominance than in dominance of the information environment[3]. If they are interested in communication, it is usually in the rather narrow but somewhat familiar field of psychological warfare, but not in systematic work with publics and target audiences both at home and abroad. All this changed significantly with the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, where militarily far less capable opponents employed smart communication strategies to balance out Western military advantages and to keep open the question about who is winning and who is losing. "How can a man

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[1] The views expressed in this Research Paper are responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

[2] For a critical assessment of the Comprehensive Approach, see Philipp Rotmann, "Built on shaky ground: the Comprehensive Approach in practice", *Research Paper No. 63*, NATO Defense College, December 2010.

[3] This cultural bias took its most drastic toll in the Vietnam War. The U.S. government and U.S. forces failed to translate their military dominance into a favourable public perception of the war effort. The image of the war turned so sour that it became politically unsustainable to continue. Even though it is now widely acknowledged that Vietnam was at least partly lost in the media, Western militaries still find it hard to embrace fully the lessons learned from this experience.

in a cave out-communicate the world's leading communications society? " Richard Holbrooke once famously asked, alluding to Osama bin Laden's skillful Public Relations machinations[4]. Militaries and politics had to learn the lesson that the perception of facts is often just as important as the facts themselves. It is a great irony that the open Western societies with their reliance on communications as the very fundament of political, economic and social life, and with their highly sophisticated theory and practice of communicating (ranging from journalism to advertising, from the financial markets to web 2.0, from traditional newspapers to virtual life in cyberspace) have so far been unable to fully muster this sophistication in the military realm[5].

This paper addresses this problem. It will focus on strategic communication and its implications for military organizations - the way strategic communication must be established and anchored both structurally and procedurally within these organizations to succeed. However, its aim is not to provide a blueprint for how communication should be done in any specific way or in any specific case (or to give a full answer to Holbrooke's question, for that matter). Neither is it a philosophical pondering of ethical or political fundamentals. Instead, it seeks to identify the organizational and procedural ingredients needed to turn the communications of large military bodies into strategic communication. By first providing a hands-on, practical definition of SC (section 2.), and by then identifying strategic communication's structural elements (section 3.), this paper aims at providing some practical guidance for those tasked to plan, organize, and execute SC in highly organized military environments. In short, this paper is about doing our organizational SC homework, it is not a field manual.

What will emerge silently as the argument progresses, is that behind every required concrete organizational and procedural change there lies a more or less fundamental change in thinking and in attitude. A real change of culture is warranted if the suggested concrete steps are to be taken. As always, cultural change is the hardest to bring about.

Defining Strategic Communications

The problem with discussing SC starts, as so often, with definitions and terminology. Numerous attempts to provide a useful definition for SC have failed to gain enough momentum and traction among either academics and practitioners. NATO has avoided tedious haggling (and political dispute) over proper wording by defining the concept of SC in rather wide and unspecific terms. In its current NATO Strategic Communications Policy, SC is defined as

"the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communication activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations

(Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PsyOps), as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims.[6]"

The United States Department of Defense defines strategic communications as follows:

"Focused United States government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.[7]"

Slightly less cryptic is the definition provided by The Strategic Communication Primer of the UK's Defence Academy:

"A systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits that promote and sustain particular types of behaviour[8]."

Many more definitions cast in the same mold can be found. Richard Halloran, critical of such "bureaucratic gibberish", suggests a more folksy definition: "strategic communication is a way of persuading other people to accept one's ideas, policies, or courses of action. In that old saw, it means 'letting you have it my way[9]'". Philip M. Taylor of the University of Leeds makes it even simpler by calling SC "propaganda", not without first trying to rid this contaminated term of its contentious undertones[10].

In sum, these definitions are of little practical value as they tend to over-emphasize the obvious, e.g. by stressing that strategic communications must serve the communicator's own interest. They also usually become too technical, including enumerations of various specific elements that should not be part of a definition. Most importantly, however, they ignore key conditions that must be met on the communicator's own side of the game, thereby committing the classic mistake of focusing prematurely on execution at the expense of proper preparation.

This paper, therefore, suggests the following definition which takes into consideration some key organizational and procedural aspects of SC:

Strategic Communication is the combined exercise of

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[4] Quoted in David Hoffman, "Beyond Public Diplomacy", in *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2002, p. 83.
[5] Numerous articles are proof of the frantic search for communications lessons learned from the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences. Examples include: Tim Foxley, "The Taliban's Propaganda Activities: How Well is the Afghan insurgency Communicating and What is it Saying?", *SIPRI Project Paper*, June 2007; Evan Parker-Stephen and Corwin D. Smidt, *"Raising the Battle Cry: Communication Strategy and the Case of Iraq"*, paper prepared for delivery at the 2009 Meeting of the American Political Science association, 3-6 September 2009; Linda Robinson, "The Propaganda War – the Pentagon's brand-New Plan for Winning the battle of Ideas Against Terrorists", *US News & World Report*, 21 May 2006; Brian Appleyard, "Lost in the Media Blitz", *The Sunday Times*, 30 March 2003.
[6] NATO Strategic Communication Policy, PO (2009)0141, 29 September 2009, p. 1-2
[7] Department of Defense, "Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms", *Joint Publication No. 1-02*, Washington, D.C., 12 April 2001 (as amended through 30 September 2010), p. 443
[8] S.A. Tatham, "Strategic Communication: A Primer", Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, *Special Series No. 08/28*, December 2008, p. 3.

all types of communication activities, conducted with the aim of influencing opinions and behavior of select recipients, fully integrated into overall operations, conducted professionally and based on comprehensive planning and long-term execution.

Note that this definition applies to both the military and the non-military communication realms. It also applies to different levels of analysis: within the military realm it aims at making communication a strategic military tool which is on eye-level with the more traditional military instruments. In the wider political sense, it aims at integrating all government communication activities of which those of the military are but one. This paper is primarily concerned with military SC[11].

Let us now take a closer look at what the various elements of this definition mean, and why they are indispensible for a communication that aspires to be strategic.

What Makes Communication Strategic?

A wide range of articles has been published with the aim of identifying lessons learned or recipes for success in military SC. Most of them are concerned about the practical application in the field. Only few try to shed light on the organizational setup that is required if SC is supposed to function in a more institutional, sustainable manner. By arranging the many recommendations and prescriptions into cohesive groups, six fundamental lessons can be identified[12]. They are listed below in no particular hierarchical order.

a. Professionalizing and Integrating the Communicators

The primary organizational imperative for strategic communications is that those responsible for such activity must be permanently and fully integrated into the political and military organizations they communicate for – and on a par with the other, more traditional elements of their organizations. Ad-hoc addition of an otherwise unrelated communications team is as unfeasible as the outsourcing of substantial parts of the communications effort. The "annexation" of communications has long been considered one of the key obstacles to a more strategic quality of the communication effort of militaries[13].

But in a time when public perceptions of an operation's legitimacy, progress and overall worthiness are as important as, if not more important than, the unfolding of the operation itself, the communicators can't be sidelined or deemed to be of secondary relevance in the organization's pecking order. Despite the incorporation of this insight into numerous official handbooks and guidance papers, it remains frequently unheeded. This reflects the deep-rooted military instinct to value the kinetic aspects of the profession higher than the non-kinetic ones.

Annexation does not only play out in the organizational setup. It also occurs during the planning processes that precede the operational stage. Even when a capable communication team is in place, it is often not used from the outset. If communications activity is supposed to be strategic, serving the overall purpose of the organization and the specific mission in question, communications personnel must be part of the planning effort from the very beginning just as it must be part of the execution of the operation. It must have an equal say in the entire process.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, the instruments of communication must be looked at as fully emancipated assets in the military toolbox. Communications provide one tool to reach the desired outcome – no more (an end in itself, or "communication for communication's sake"), no less (a low-priority add-on only loosely connected to the main effort). Ensuring that this is the case is a leadership task, to be fulfilled from the highest political level (governmental and ministerial level) down to the commanding officer in the field.

While the communication apparatus must be fully integrated into the organizational setup, it must also enjoy a considerable degree of independence in its internal workings. For this, two elements must be in place.

First, the communications apparatus of the military and its civilian administrations must run on its own budget line. Only independence of funding ensures professional independence, which is in turn indispensable for delivering unbiased professional expertise. Communications people, dependent for their financial and other means on the goodwill of other stakeholders within the same organization, run the risk of becoming compliant yes-men.

Secondly, professional independence can only be reached if communications personnel receive specifically devised and highly professional training and are allowed to develop a specific code of professionalism in their own field of expertise. Only then will the communications personnel cease to be a mere add-on, and start to develop an acceptable level professional self-assuredness and self-confidence. Such training will take considerable time and might entail stints within professional news media and the private sector (commercial and non-profit). To attract some of the best and brightest for the field, communication should be made attractive to aspiring leadership personnel by making it a designated military career field with high-end professional training and the possibility to rise in rank without having regularly to leave the field.

Thirdly, in the long run, integration also entails that communications should ideally become a "horizontal matter" within military organizations, i.e. a certain minimum of communications

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[9] Richard Halloran, "Strategic Communication", in *Parameters*, Autumn 2007, pp 4-14, p. 6. (The phrase "letting you have it my way" is more usually used as a tongue-in-cheek definition of diplomacy).

[10] Philip M. Taylor, "Strategic Communications and the Relationship between Governmental 'Information' Activities in the Post 9/11 World", in *Journal of Information Warfare*, No. 5/2006.

[11] This paper will, however, not discuss the issue of civilian control over the military which could potentially arise in the debate of strategic communication. The author takes this central tenet of Western democracies as a given.

[12] For some of his observations and conclusions, the author has drawn from his experience as a desk officer in the German Ministry of Defence's Press and Information Department between 2001 and 2006.

[13] Halloran quotes a private conversation with a U.S. officer who has served in Iraq, who states: "We plan kinetic campaigns and maybe consider adding a public affairs annex. Our adversaries plan information campaigns that exploit kinetic events (…) We aren't even on the playing field." Richard Halloran, *Strategic Communication*, p. 4.

training will be required for every soldier's and civilian's position, regardless of specification or level of exposure to the media. Just as basic training prepares every single military individual with a set of elementary skills about his or her profession, a modular "Communications 101" must be on the curriculum for military and civilian training at all levels. In the age of the "Strategic corporal[14]", basic principles of communication awareness and media training, including some hands-on practice, should be a required minimum standard. This is especially true since low-ranking soldiers such as enlisted men and junior NCOs are now believed to "consistently be the (U.S.) Army's best, most believable representatives[15]".

Full integration, as described here, has one important final aspect: It does not only mean the integration of communication personnel, thinking, and procedures into the military organization across all levels (tactical, operational, strategic). It also entails the full horizontal integration of military communication efforts into the overall communication strategy of the nation's government. The military must be represented in strategic decision-making about communication efforts, just as the civilian parts of government must feed their input and needs into the military's communication planning. In an even wider context, integration must also reach into other participating entities, such as multinational headquarters, allied nations and partnering organizations. In short, Integration on the (internal) micro-level as described above must be complemented with integration on the (wider external) macro-level. In this, SC and its need for integration follows very much the basic tenets of (and is part of) the Comprehensive Approach[16].

b. The Streamlining of all Types of Communication

One of the most difficult tasks for military organizations is to bring the various types of communications that are being employed by the armed forces together into a common fold. Be it Public Affairs (PA), Public Relations (PR), Public Diplomacy (PD), Information Operations (Info Ops), Psychological Operations (PsyOps), Recruitment[17], or the various types of sub-groups that have formed over time, they all claim fundamental otherness and universal wisdom for themselves. As a consequence, in many military and civilian organizations, parallel structures have formed which operate independently (or strive to do so) and resist coordination and unified planning. Binding them all together into one comprehensive communications apparatus, equipped with a shared understanding of the job ahead, is nevertheless indispensable if that communication aspires to be strategic. If that is not immediately possible, then extremely close coordination should be the minimum. Not achieving this will most certainly

create dissonances or even contradictions in messaging, thereby undermining not only all of the various efforts undertaken but also, at least in the long run, the credibility of the organization and those who communicate for it.

Furthermore, it is a leadership task to ensure that the adopted communication strategy encompasses all categories of communications employed within the organization. The binding element uniting all these functions is a shared overall objective to which they will contribute, and the shared operational goals and messages derived from that objective. The decisive importance of shared goals as the glue that keeps all communications efforts together creates the need for very careful a priori planning. The leadership of the organization must not only determine these goals and messages by consulting all stakeholders within the organization. It is also their task to keep these shared goals and messages visible at all times within the organization and throughout the entire operation.

A key leadership tool to ensure communication is all-encompassing is to establish the position of a director of communications (DoC) endowed with the overall responsibility for communications activities. This position should, ideally, not be involved in the day-to-day running of affairs, especially not in the activities of the spokesperson and his/her PA department[18]. Instead, being directly plugged into the political decision-making level, this position should primarily have a steering and guiding function beyond the daily grind, thereby guaranteeing unity of effort and a degree of institutional memory[19]. The director of communications should report directly to the military commander/political leader responsible for the overall operation.

If the tendency of large organizations to create unrelated entities instead of cooperation is a universal phenomenon, the other major obstacle to making communications all-encompassing is more intrinsic to the multi-faceted nature of communications. All the various categories of communications differ, to varying degrees, with respect to methodology and the ethos by which they operate. Usually, these obstacles can be overcome. But while Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy and most other forms can, with some effort and goodwill, be streamlined, one outlier remains: the very specific realm of Information Operations, including Psychological Operations (formerly called psychological warfare)[20].

InfoOps are different in that, they do not shy away, if deemed useful, from violating the cardinal rule of all communications: thou shalt not lie. This poses a major dilemma for military communicators.

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[14] The term "Strategic Corporal" was coined by Charles Krulak to show how, in modern warfare, even the least prominent member of a team can have a strategic impact on the overall operation. See Charles Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War", in *Marines*, January 1999, p. 31. This model has frequently been used to illustrate how, in today's media environment, every single soldier's actions might have decisive impact on overall public perceptions of large operations. See United States Department of the Army, Training and Doctrine Command, *The U.S. Army Commander's Appreciation and Campaign Design*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500, 28 January 2008, p. 7.

[15] See Jim Marshall, *Media on the Battlefield*, at globalsecurity.org, < http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/call/call_98-24_ch2.htm> (accessed 6 December 2010).

[16] The overwhelming need for both vertical and horizontal integration of their communication efforts made ISAF forces in the field call it "synchronized communication" which very much proves the point.

[17] Recruitment is often overlooked as an important element of militaries' communication effort. It is included here because for three reasons: First, it is a major (and very specific) exercise in communication in almost all Western armed forces, often absorbing a significant share of communications budgets. Secondly, its success is hugely important for maintaining high levels of quality and readiness of armed forces. Thirdly, its success, at least partly, relies on the effectiveness of other communication efforts. As all publicly available information about the armed forces will, in one way or another, impact on individual decisions about whether to join the military or not, it is safe to say that all military communication is recruitment-relevant.

InfoOps can be deliberately about confusing and deceiving the recipient/opponent, an objective that is a taboo to all other types of communications. On the other hand, as InfoOps are clearly an exercise in communications, they cannot be completely uncoupled from all other functions of communications without putting at risk message cohesiveness.

The permanent tension that is created by this dilemma has long been a subject of debate. Some scholars have clearly stated that "deception should be rigorously forbidden in strategic communication", and all communication functions that employ deception should "not come under the purview of the Office of Strategic Communication", but should be kept under Special Operations or with the intelligence agencies[21]. If a minimum of information sharing and streamlining between the "regular communicators" and InfoOps is guaranteed, this appears to be the most functional solution. NATO, however has not adopted this approach. Instead, it has gone to great lengths to attempt to square the circle. The Alliance's Strategic Communications Policy deliberately includes InfoOps, putting it into the portfolio of the communications wing of the organization while, at the same time, clearly separating InfoOps from all other disciplines of communications by stipulating that:

> "Public Affairs and Information Operations are separate but related functions. There shall be no personnel overlaps during operations of staff designated for information Operations on the one hand, and Public Affairs on the other hand[22]."

This approach will be a continuous challenge, as boundaries that can be safely drawn in theory tend to blur in the field. How does "separate but related" play out in practice? Will the separation hold in the heat of combat or crisis when, if in doubt, practical considerations have a tendency to trump matters of principle? It will be the commander's difficult task to make sure such creeping breach of rules, if tolerated on occasion, does not become commonly accepted practice.

c. Making Communication a Long-Term Endeavour

According to common prejudice, most people responsible for communications, be they civilians or military, are "news junkies". They are deemed to be obsessed with breaking news and developing stories and to get deep satisfaction out of managing "situations" and producing timely reactions to such developments, contributing their own mite to the situation as it unfolds. Despite a degree of exaggeration, this portrayal is not far from the truth.

It is especially valid in organizations in which communications is reduced to press relations or where it is dominated by press officers. As communications departments (before turning into larger and more diversified units) often started out as press offices, over-emphasizing press-relations and the ability to react to the latest development is a widespread phenomenon. In such a culture, communication tends to become short of breath, being singularly focused on recent updates.

But even in the fast-moving business of press relations, short-termism is no virtue. Neither is it anywhere else in the field of communications. Naturally, a well-run press-office, able to inform, assess and react quickly, is a highly valuable asset. But if the communications function aspires to be strategic, it needs to think long-term, i.e. it needs to be prepared to cultivate the information environment over a protracted period of time (often measured in years), and it needs to accept that the results of that work, if measurable at all, will probably only be visible years after it was begun. This long-termism indicates that the needs and the approaches of the communications people will, in all likelihood, regularly collide with political and/or military demands which often aim at quick fixes and a rapid return-on-investment.

SC pursues long-term interests and goals, and only then is it strategic. While dealing with operational needs and the daily press situation in the foreground, in the background it attempts to build trust, conduct image building, undertake risk communications (it tries to create awareness of the negative news that will inevitably come out of a high-risk environment such as the military), cultivate journalists and other multipliers, develop sustainable editorial lines for the organization's own media, and cooperate with civilian partners (for example in the entertainment business), to name but a few examples. Strategic communication also includes the preparation for crisis communication and the respective planning and exercising.

Furthermore, the long-termism of communications entails the careful study of target audiences and the communications environment at home, abroad and in the theatre of operations[23]. Not only is it important to identify and name distinct target audiences. It also means conducting extensive research on their characteristics. The following aspects should be taken into consideration: public opinion (inter alia by means of polling, direct people-to-people encounters, systematic analysis of incoming requests and complaints, etc.); the cultural framework of the communications environment (including customs, beliefs and taboos prevalent in that environment); preferences, desires, needs,

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[18] In the private sector, most large corporations have Communication Directors with overarching responsibility for all of the company's information policies, including press relations. The press spokesperson is usually subordinate to the DoC.

[19] An example for a dysfunctional organizational setup is the Press and Information Department of the German Ministry of Defense. Here the Defense Minister's personal spokesperson must simultaneously fulfil the function of Director of Communications. This leads to him being pre-occupied with the extremely demanding task of managing the relentlessly developing news situation with no capacity left for long-term considerations or any substantial thinking and planning in fields other than press relations. Also, this solution leads to the remaining types of communications being assessed solely through the lens of a press secretary, thereby leading to biased judgments on the utility of non-press-related functions.

[20] The Pentagon's wide definition of the term Information Operations makes it clear that PsyOps is considered to be a subset of InfoOps, not an independent function. Other definitions consider them to be separate activities. This paper uses the wider definition. See Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, p. 225.

[21] Richard Halloran, *Strategic Communication*, p. 13.

[22] NATO Strategic Communications Policy, PO(2009)0141, p.1-3.

and interests of target audiences; and the media environment (including the prevailing level of professionalism, and the economic, legal and technical conditions of media production).

Developing a long-term approach to communications also requires development of a culture of action and initiative. Traditionally, government agencies, and the military in particular, tend to adopt a mostly passive, reactive kind of approach to communications, sometimes described as the "we-will-pick-up-the-phone-when-it-rings" attitude. This is partly to do with a deeply engrained culture of officialism, which deems communications an unworthy kind of endeavour for institutions bestowed with governmental authority. Remnants of this culture are still alive in many countries, especially in the non-Anglo-Saxon world. Often, this problem is aggravated by the high value military environments usually attach to secrecy. As a consequence, militaries are rarely active about their communications, becoming active only when there is an immediate need to do so.

In the modern communication environment, this passivity is no longer a winning strategy. Militaries need to enter the market-place of ideas, engage target-audiences early on, and define the issues and terminology of the discourse before they are defined by others. One of the great challenges for those in charge of making the military's communications strategic is to develop an entrepreneurial spirit, the creativity and, to a certain extent, the playfulness one needs to fully partake in the modern information environment. All of this is a challenge for organizations that work under considerable time pressure. But this kind of active approach needs considerable time to sink in and produce results. Also, not all newly embraced ideas and projects conceived will immediately bring about tangible results, making them an easy target for internal criticisms. But the very essence of strategy, as opposed to operational and tactical level thinking, is a longer time-frame in which it must be allowed to unfold.

Very much related to the pro-active element of communications is the final essential component of long-termism: military communications environments must develop from being risk-averse to being more risk-accepting. Long-term strategies, given their broader scope and their more complex composition are, by definition, riskier strategies than the less complex and less ambitious short-term ones. There are simply more parts that can potentially fail. The internal ("corporate") culture of the military, for many reasons, is traditionally rather risk-averse. This is doubly true in the realm of communications with its political undertones, its unpredictability, and its resistance to procedural control.

It is often very difficult to make such a naturally risk-averse environment accept the idea that a more complex (and therefore riskier) long-term approach will in the end be the more beneficial one. But only long-term engagement can produce trust in target audiences, provide guidance for the communicators themselves, and build a sustainable positive public image.

In short, only long-term engagement can create the very assets one wants to fall back on in times of crisis. The key to developing this kind of risk-acceptance is to make it clear to people that bad news and failures are (a) not always bad, as they can also be used constructively, (b) for the most part ephemeral and require a modicum of patience to be relativized, (c) are often not perceived by the public as being as grave as one tends to believe oneself. In other words, communicators need to learn to weather bad news and failures, and to tolerate and endure them. This is impossible in a culture that aims at eradicating risk by means of strict control and limited exposure, and which is singularly focused on short-term communication results.

d. Yes, You Do Want To Influence People!

A small but essential prerequisite for strategic communication is that it aims to influence peoples' opinions, convictions and behavior. Under normal circumstances, this is considered to be a matter of course. But a lot of organizations will not openly admit that these kinds of effects (which may well include very concrete behavioral change) are what they are aiming at, for fear of being accused of manipulation, propaganda, or even "brain-washing." Nevertheless, all strategic communication must aspire to influence people. Well-crafted, carefully monitored, and professionally executed communications campaigns need not fear attacks on their legitimacy as they will never violate the boundaries of legitimacy (badly executed ones might, though). Second and more importantly, not being about this aspiration and goal of communication can create a culture of passivity and listlessness amongst one's own staff and may lead to a reduction of the level of ambition in the communication effort before it even commences. One should not naively assume that communication is just a cumbersome legal obligation, conducted solely to demonstrate some basic accountability vis-à-vis the tax payer. Neither is it being done just because it was ordered from above. It is an integral part of the military task, and a legitimate tool to exert influence both in peace-time and during operations.

Another attack on the behavioral aspect of strategic communications comes from a different direction. As it is notoriously difficult to measure the ultimate success of campaigns designed to change people's attitudes and behaviours, they frequently come under attack as being useless and a waste of money, time and manpower. The lack of hard numbers to back up their usefulness makes such activities easy targets that are difficult to defend within bureaucracies, especially military ones which have a sometimes simplistic appetite for "tangibles". For a commander or a civilian leader it therefore requires steadfastness and trust in the communicators to defend the effort.

Communications would be a pointless effort and a waste of assets if it did not aspire to influence human beings in ways that are conducive to one's own interests and objectives. Naturally, this can only be successful if it is done sensibly, based on good research,

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[23] See Lee Rowland and Steve Tatham, *Strategic Communication & Influence Operations: Do We Really Get It?*, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, July 2010, page 2 ff. For Rowland and Tatham, "Target Audience Analysis" (TAA) is the "beginning and end of all military influence endeavours", a view that is not entirely shared by the author of this paper. While TAA certainly is a key component and must be done with great diligence, other elements of the planning process and the organizational setup of the communications apparatus are of equal importance.

and with considerable amounts of time at hand. Also, it must be firmly grounded in a legal and ethical framework. It must tread carefully in order not arouse suspicions of being manipulative. It is, in sum, an extremely difficult business. But a SC effort that rejects the idea of influencing people is either dishonest or will fall short.

e. Extensive and Careful Planning

One of the biggest temptations in the field of communications is to "wing it", to improvise communications on a day-to-day basis. Often, the heroic pose of the ever-juggling press officer, making the best of a volatile and unclear solution is hailed as exemplary, pointing out that the communications environment is developing at stellar speed and that the 24-hour news-cycle demands flexibility. And there is truth in that. But the whole truth is, as always, more complicated. When taken together, all the previously mentioned elements, most of them being organizational factors, demand a procedural element as an enabler: careful planning.

If improvisation is one big folly of many communicators, then coordination is the other. Most definitions of SC have in common a strong emphasis on coordination. This seems to suggest that the various types of communication are already being done well and that they only have to be brought into concert to make the whole endeavor strategic. This is a mistake. If the different communication tools are not conceived together in the very beginning, it will be hard, if not impossible to coordinate them. The better the planning at an early stage, the less need to coordinate (which in reality often means: micro-manage) later.

Naturally, communications plans, like all plans, are subject to the proverbial dictum that battle plans are obsolete the moment the forces meet the enemy. Still, a carefully conceived plan, containing all elements and instruments of a campaign, and known to all stakeholders, is of high value. Even though it will never (even under the best of circumstances) be implemented in its entirety, it provides guidance when the unforeseen happens and improvised action is warranted.

Military and political leaders should resist the temptation to shorten or skip the tedious planning process and rely solely on the ad-hoc management skills of their communications people. They must be equally careful not to heed the false advice often given which stipulates that elaborate plans only curb flexibility and create constraints where they are not needed. Plans are not carved in stone, they can be altered and even ignored if the situation so requires. Plans do not restrict flexibility. But the process of planning brings stakeholders to the table, increases the sense of solidarity amongst them, makes options visible, increases confidence, creates legitimacy for means and ends, and provides guidance and security in the fog of war. Plans should thus be carefully crafted, and time should be set aside to do so. Leading the planning process is a primary leadership task for any civilian or military leader.

Planning tools for strategic communications campaigns, both

civilian and military can be found in large numbers in official documents, scholarly works, handbooks, and on the internet[24]. What their combined advice boils down to is a set number of elements that any communications strategy should entail:

• <u>Common goals.</u> When planning, identifying a common goal is frequently skipped because it is – almost always falsely – assumed that everybody is in agreement on such a fundamental question. The surprise is great when it turns out later that different stakeholders were working under very different assumptions as to what the goal was. Then the process must start at the beginning again and valuable time is lost. Goals can be divided into "high goals", i.e. the overall goals of the organization/government, and "low" goals, i.e. operational goals that are to be reached in the actual campaign. For reasons of cohesiveness, the latter must be derived directly from the former and serve as its enabler. By and large, the more time you reserve to defining the goals, the more easily the other parts of the plan will fall into place.

• <u>Messages.</u> Clearly defined messages, if properly delivered, trigger the intended change of opinion and/or behaviour. Messages might vary, depending on the specific target audiences they are intended to reach. But the totality of messages must be contradiction-free.

• <u>Target audiences.</u> Target audiences must be carefully selected, based on the value they have for the achievement of the defined goals. They must be well understood, which will likely require some Target Audience Analyses (TAA).

• <u>Drivers.</u> These are the means that deliver the messages to the target audiences. This can be basically everything: people (spokespeople, political leaders, scholars, analysts, celebrity testimonials, bystanders, etc.), material (press releases, books, brochures, leaflets, give-aways, etc.), events (newshooks such as press conferences, speeches, outreach activities, travels, backgrounders, etc.), and an endless number of other tools. The sky is the limit, but the communication plan needs to list them comprehensively.

• <u>Responsibilities.</u> A clear definition of who does what and reports to whom.

• <u>Timeframe.</u> What is to be done at what time? When does the overall campaign start and end?

• <u>Resources.</u> Information on the available budget, manpower, and equipment.

• <u>Evaluation Mechanism.</u> A permanent feedback process that evaluates the overall campaign and, if possible, measures its success.

Finally, apart from creating a communication strategy, planning also serves the additional purpose of being an exercise in self-assurance, i.e. it makes clear to all involved where their organization stands, what its aims are and where it wants to go. The planning process itself, often unintentionally, raises many fundamental questions about one's own purpose, often followed by heated debate. It thereby offers an important opportunity to close ranks and to create confidence and team spirit, all of which are important assets as they will have a direct impact on the quality of the work

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[24] Examples can be found in US Joint Forces Command, Joint Warfighting Center, *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communications*, 1 September 2008; Allied Command Operations and Allied Command Transformation, *Public Affairs Handbook*, July 2010; Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, *Plan the Work: A Handbook for Strategic Communications Planning for Not-for-Profit Organizations*, Vancouver 2002; Renee Fissenwert, Stephanie Schmidt, *Konzeptionspraxis, Eine Einfuehrung fuer PR- und Kommunikationsfachleute*, (2nd edition) Frankfurt am Main 2004; Amanda Barry, *PR Power – Inside Secrets from the World of Spin*, Virgin Business Guides, London 2002.

and the power of persuasion of those communicating[25]. As most analytical thinking about SC focuses on "the other", the recipients and target audiences, this positive side-effect is often overlooked. Often, this aspect alone makes the planning process worth the effort.

f. Be Humble!

This paper has argued, among other things, for military communicators to be self-confident about themselves and their still largely undervalued task. Having said that, it is important to remember that humility is also a primary virtue of the communicator. Communication will find it easier to have a strategic impact if it also knows its limits. Having this level of self-awareness will protect the communicator from over-promising and from being immoderately ambitious.

There are many good reasons for humility. One is the old adage that even the best communication cannot "sell" a rotten product. If the outset of a policy or a military operation is wrong, ill-conceived or otherwise unfeasible communication will not be able to make it shine, at least not in a sustainable way. To the contrary, it will ruin itself in the process, losing its most important assets, credibility and thereby adding to public cynicism. Fundamentally, the cause which SC intends to further must be a good one, as old-fashioned as that may sound. NATO's Public Affairs Handbook puts it slightly differently: "Military public affairs policy in NATO is derived from *the higher principles of democracy*[26]" (emphasis added). The same applies to all communication efforts in the broadest sense. A professional communicator must therefore make himself heard if an envisioned project sounds wrong, is in violation with laws or other established standards, or detrimental to one's own interest.

In the same mold, a communicator must never forget that no matter how well SC is done, it can never fully replace strategic action. Deeds are better than words, and one good concrete example on the ground will send out a more potent message than many communication projects combined.

Another case for humility is that it will enable the communicator to curb his or her own enthusiasm. One of the primary follies of the highly motivated communicator is to over-communicate. But recipients have a sharp sense for whether they are being treated properly. Too much communication will come across as being aggressive, manipulative, lacking in credibility, driven by hidden motives, and suspicious. So communicators should have a sense of modesty about what can realistically be achieved.

Communicators should be humble so that they do not elevate themselves over the truth. As mentioned above, communication must never be based on false information. It is possible, on occasion, to not give away the entire truth. But it is not possible to tell a lie. Communicators with their knack for creating the "right" messages are often prone to creating their own version of reality – their own truth. This is a grave danger and humility, along with good control

and the occasional reality check, will enable communications people not to project an excessive message.

Finally, humility is advisable because, in the end, communication is only one of many tools in the military's toolbox. Even though SC is still an underdeveloped skill and often does not receive proper attention, it should not be seen as the miracle ointment that heals all illnesses. Communicators should strive confidently to be recognized as equally valuable contributors to the overall military effort. But no matter how important they are, should be, or deem themselves, they should never forget to be team players.

Conclusion

In the modern security environment SC is a key military function. It will potentially become even more important as traditional nation-to-nation warfare between regular armies becomes increasingly unlikely. Military organizations, therefore, need to incorporate fully SC into both their organizational setup and their procedural inner workings. They need to provide the resources for proper planning, training and practice of SC efforts. They also need to think about SC as a long-term endeavor, aimed at changing the behavior of adversaries and other target audiences. Realizing the full potential of SC (and also its limitations) will not just require some minor ad-hoc adjustments, but a deep and comprehensive change of the military's "corporate" culture. If done correctly, SC will enable the military, in addition to its kinetic capabilities, to better engage in the battle of ideas.

Amongst NATO member states, there are marked inequalities in the level of professionalism in SC. It would be advisable to address these issues in very concrete terms.

Recommendations to this end include:

- the development of an Alliance-wide standard serving as a guideline for the organizational and procedural setup of strategic communications.
- the systematic implementation of these standards by providing NATO-Financed training and assessment courses, including an alliance-wide certification system.
- regular multinational StratComm exercises.
- the creation of military career tracks in strategic communication which allow for the systematic building-up and cultivation of specific skills and capacities, including education and training in bench-mark civilian institutions (universities, corporations, think tanks).
- the establishing of modular and repeated communication training as part of every soldier's and civilian's basic education ("communication mainstreaming").

In a security environment in which the skilful delivery of the message is just as important as the skilful delivery of the projectile, these improvements could make a significant difference for our militaries' performance.

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[25] For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between successful communication and the sense of self, see: CB3Blog, *Synergy and Style – Cornerstones of Strategic Communication*, 21 May 2010, http://cb3communications.com/?p=704 (accessed 8.12.2010).

[26] Allied Command Operations and Allied Command Transformation, *Public Affairs Handbook*, p. 1.