



# The Trouble with Strategic Communication(s)

BY DENNIS M. MURPHY

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Recently the U.S. Southern Command's Admiral James Stavridis paraphrased World War II's great naval commander and strategist Ernest King: "I don't know what the hell this [strategic communication] is that Marshall is always talking about, but I want some of it."<sup>1</sup> This past summer over 200 strategic communication practitioners and academics met at the National War College for the first annual Worldwide Strategic Communication Seminar. Senior government officials urged attendees to get on with the business of strategic communication, noting that "we will be flying the plane while we're building it."<sup>2</sup> Both of these previous statements point to the urgency of integrating effective strategic communication into military operations while recognizing that we don't quite understand how to do it...or even understand what it is. So, if the intent is to fly the plane while building it, the pilot check-list becomes of paramount importance to ensure the aircraft not only gets off the ground but also avoids crashing and burning once it takes flight. In other words, we must educate leaders, particularly warfighters, about what strategic communication is...and what it isn't. The difficulty, of course, is that there is no military doctrine for strategic communication, leaving both its definition and the process associated with it open to interpretation.

## Strategic Communication...or Strategic Communications?

The trouble with an emerging (and important) concept sans doctrine is that the terminology (i.e. the lexicon) can act to define that concept. Thus, military leaders loosely throw about the term strategic communications (with an "s") validating King's modified quote. Lacking any further understanding beyond the term itself, the default definition of strategic communication in the minds of many has to do with media interaction, which further devolves to establishing effective talking points for the next press briefing.<sup>3</sup> This is not only wrong, it is dangerous. It significantly limits the ability of the actual process of strategic communication (no "s") to synergistically support military operations. In that light it is important to examine what strategic communication is in order to better exploit its full capabilities.

There is no overarching U.S. government definition of strategic communication.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, a Department of Defense definition as a result of the most recent Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) which produced a Strategic Communication Roadmap. Strategic communication is "focused USG (United States Government) processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs and actions synchronized with other elements of national power."<sup>5</sup> The Roadmap goes on to list the primary supporting capabilities of strategic communication as Public Affairs, aspects of Information Operations (principally psychological operations), Military Diplomacy, Defense Support to Public Diplomacy, and Visual Information.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately this list limits the perceived means available to communications (emphasis intentionally added) based activities and so reinforces the lexicon of the term itself. And therein lies the rub with current interpretations of strategic communication by military leaders. Considering strategic communication as a menu of self-limiting communications capabilities will ensure the plane never takes off (to use the previous analogy). Instead, interpretation of the definition itself must serve as the basis of understanding by educators who teach strategic communication and by practitioners who plan and implement it.

*Professor Dennis M. Murphy is the Director of the Information in Warfare Group, part of the Science and Technology Division of the Center for Strategic Leadership, U.S. Army War College.*

Strategists use a model of “ends, ways and means” to describe all aspects of a national or military strategy. Strategy is about how (the way) leaders will use the capabilities (means) available to achieve objectives (ends).<sup>7</sup> Understanding and engaging key audiences is meant to change perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and, ultimately behaviors to help achieve military (and in turn national) objectives. Thus, parsing the QDR definition it is apparent that strategic communication is a “way” to achieve an information effect on the cognitive dimension of the information environment (the required “end”).<sup>8</sup> Strategic communication employs multiple “means” and these means should be restricted only by the requirement to achieve the desired information effect on the target audience.

Messages are certainly sent by verbal and visual communications means, but they are also sent by actions. (Note that the QDR definition specifically includes “actions”). In fact, senior officials point out that strategic communication is “80% actions and 20% words.”<sup>9</sup> Specifically, how military operations are conducted affects the information environment by impacting perceptions, attitudes and beliefs. Recent examples include use of U.S. Navy hospital ships in regional engagement and Pakistani earthquake relief efforts<sup>10</sup> in permissive environments. But hostile environments like the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters also provide opportunities to positively shape the information environment. This clarification and expanded understanding of the definition is critical if the military hopes to effectively educate leaders on how to fully exploit strategic communication to support military operations. Key to success is an organizational unit culture that values, understands, and thus considers strategic communication means as important capabilities to be integrated within established planning processes.

### Strategic Communication and Information Operations: A Side by Side Comparison

Strategic communication, as analyzed above, allows consideration of another dilemma in military education and practitioners’ understanding: what is the difference between strategic communication and information operations (IO)? A close look at the doctrinal definition of IO and the QDR definition of strategic communication provides some answers. Information Operations is “the integrated employment of the core capabilities of Electronic Warfare (EW), Computer Network Operations (CNO), Psychological Operations (PSYOP), Military Deception, (MILDEC) and Operations Security in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision-making while protecting our own.”<sup>11</sup> Much like strategic communication, the definition of IO should be considered with less regard toward the stated core capabilities than the process that results in an information effect. With that in mind a comparison of the two definitions reveals evident distinctions.

Strategic communication is the more broadly overarching concept targeting key audiences and focusing on the cognitive dimension of the information environment. IO as an integrating function, on the other hand, more specifically targets an adversary’s decision making capability which may be in the cognitive, informational and/or physical dimensions of the information environment.

	Target	Effect	Dimension	Primary Capabilities
SC	Key audiences (friendly, neutral, adversarial)	Understand and engage	Cognitive (people)	PA, PSYOP, MD, DSPD, VI
IO	Adversarial human and automated decision-making	Influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp	Cognitive, informational, physical (people, processes, systems)	EW, CNO, OPSEC, MILDEC, PSYOP

Considering the targets and effects described above, it should be clear that both strategic communication and IO can be employed at all levels of warfare (tactical, operational, theater strategic and national strategic). Tactical commanders routinely employ strategic communication in Iraq today based on their interactions with key audiences in their area of responsibility to a potential strategic end. On the other end of the scale, IO could certainly be employed strategically as part of a shaping Phase 0 operation or a deterrent Phase 1 operation against a potential adversary’s decision-making capability.

Confusing these terms, however, should not be of significant concern provided that the commander does not limit himself to the listed capabilities as his only means to impact the information environment.<sup>12</sup> Instead, military planners

should recognize that achieving a military objective will naturally have information effects, and that the messages sent by both actions (kinetic and non-kinetic) and communications means contribute to and shape those ultimate effects. Strategic communication or IO? It doesn't matter provided you achieve your objectives with the information environment shaped as you intended. Achieving that end though, requires an understanding of how and where information is considered in the military planning process.

## **Effectively Integrating Strategic Communication**

Remembering that strategic communication is a way to achieve cognitive information effects using any means available takes the mystery out of the concept. Strategic communication simply employs capabilities (limited only to the imagination) to support the achievement of a military objective. Just as a commander integrates air, land and sea capabilities into military planning and execution, he can and should integrate strategic communication capabilities. The planning process is not new. The focus on and understanding of this new concept and its capabilities, however, may be.

First, planners must define the information environment and its physical, informational and cognitive dimensions. How does the target audience receive their information (TV, radio, internet, rumor, religious services, etc.)? How does culture play into the message? Who are the credible messengers? Next, planners need to consider the desired effect on the cognitive dimension, i.e. the ends or outcome. Does the endstate include changing perceptions, influencing people, gaining acceptance, gaining credibility and trust, gaining support? This will drive how the operation will be conducted where themes and messages are necessary, but not sufficient.

Any military planner will quickly see how this logical thought process fits neatly into the established military decision-making process (or campaign planning process). The information environment is considered in the analysis of the overarching operational environment. The commander's intent establishes an endstate. This must include a statement of the desired information environment endstate. A properly stated information endstate in the commander's intent will guide staffs in the selection of appropriate courses of action and drive subordinate units in the way they conduct operations to achieve that endstate. A selected course of action will then be wargamed using the traditional friendly action, expected enemy reaction, and friendly counteraction methodology. The wargaming process must also occur with an eye toward information effects. This becomes especially important in counterinsurgency operations where the enemy uses information as an asymmetric strategic means and where changing indigenous populations' perceptions can turn them from a neutral position to one in favor of coalition forces. But it also applies across all levels of the spectrum of conflict in an environment where military operations will likely be covered in real time by both mainstream and "new" media sources.

Currently staff sections exist at both the service (e.g. the G7 in the Army) and joint (the J39 for IO) levels to focus on the information environment for the commander. Most combatant commands have also established strategic communication directorates or incorporated strategic communication planning into effects cells. Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) have recently been employed in Afghanistan at the brigade level to support a focus on the information environment in planning with very positive initial success. These teams include a social scientist with expertise in cultural issues.<sup>13</sup> The education pipeline, however, is not overflowing with trained information experts...and most brigades will likely never see a social scientist assigned to their staff. On the other hand, it is less important to have a school-trained information staff section than to have the command understand the value and importance of information effects and incorporate strategic communication means to achieve those effects into the existing planning process.

## **Conclusion**

Strategic Communication is simply a way to affect perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of key audiences in support of objectives. Certainly communications means are very important in ultimately achieving those desired information effects. But how military operations are conducted is also a key component of strategic communication, since actions send very loud and clear messages. Effective strategic communication requires an organizational culture attuned to the information environment and a recognition that strategic communication, as a way to achieve information effects, consists of many capabilities (means) that are an integral part of the commander's arsenal. Staff expertise may

be available to support these efforts. Still, the trained staff section is less important than a unit culture where the commander both recognizes what strategic communication is (and isn't) and emphasizes strategic communication as important to successful military operations.

## Endnotes

1. James G. Stavridis, "Strategic Communication and National Security," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter, 2007, p. 4.
2. The Worldwide Strategic Communication Seminar took place at the National War College from 11-12 July 2007 under Chatham House rules to protect the anonymity of speakers and allow for full and open discussion.
3. The author has developed and organized a strategic communication higher control cell for the U.S. Army War College's capstone exercise for the past three years. Faculty surveys consistently state that students performed well at strategic communication, but more detailed questions indicated that "doing well" consisted principally of conducting effective press briefings.
4. The National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication, published in May 2007, does not define strategic communication. In fact, it further muddies the waters by distinguishing between public diplomacy (a means) and strategic communication (a way).
5. U.S. Department of State, "QDR Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication," September 2006, p. 3.
6. Ibid, p 2.
7. Harry R. Yarger, "Toward a Theory of Strategy: Art Lykke and the Army War College Strategy Model," *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Strategy and Policy*, June 2006, p. 107
8. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Publication 3-13, Information Operations," 13 February 2006, pp. I-1. This publication indicated the information environment consists of three interrelated dimensions: physical; informational, and cognitive.
9. The author has attended numerous briefings by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Joint Communication (DASD (JC)) and his staff where this has been stated. Note: the DASD (JC) is responsible for the DOD Strategic Communication Roadmap.
10. Anju S. Bawa, "U.S. Aid Ship Cures Public Opinion," *Washington Times*, 17 November 2006, p. 15.
11. Joint Publication 3-13, p. I-1.
12. Colonel Ralph Baker makes a compelling case for the importance of information effects as a main effort while a brigade commander in Iraq. He refers to his actions as "information operations" but a close read reveals that his unit was primarily conducting strategic communication. See "The Decisive Effort: A Brigade Combat Team Commander's Perspective on Information Operations" in the May-June 2006 issue of *Military Review*.
13. Department of Defense, "Human Terrain Team Preliminary Assessment: Executive Summary," July-August 2007, pp. 1-6.

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE  
Center for Strategic Leadership  
650 Wright Avenue  
Carlisle, PA 17103-5049