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Preparing for Contemporary Operations in a Strategic Communications World

by Brett Boudreau
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POLICY UPDATE

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F or the insurgent or malign actor, the most cost-effective and largest return on investment lies in the ability to enter, use, manipulate and shape the information environment.

Adversaries can be expected to resort to asymmetric means, including the exploitation of increasingly interconnected systems and networks, as a way of avoiding the West's comparative advantage in weapons and technology. The ability to collect, edit and disseminate powerful imagery, seed rumours and fabrications, and connect widely dispersed like-minded parties, diasporas and other communities (including to inspire and incite), is available to literally anyone in the world with access to a phone or computer.

The West has dramatically witnessed how an ideologically driven movement such as Daesh can creatively employ print, electronic, social media and video communication channels to produce material of exceptional quality and to chilling effect. Recent events have also demonstrated the results that can be obtained by a country with a determined leader who controls such media and is armed with the will to marshal those assets. Russia's unscrupulous but coordinated campaign has galvanized a national population behind the attack on Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, and also served to sow confusion and doubt elsewhere, making it a greater challenge to fashion a cohesive joint international response. So successful has been the Russian approach that the term 'hybrid warfare' has been appropriated to describe it.

Conventional wisdom amongst Western officials and publics is that their strategic communications (StratCom) effort against adversaries, including Daesh and Russia, is poor by comparison. A widely held view is also that the West failed in StratCom in its most significant military effort over the last half century, the 2001-2014 UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) campaign in Afghanistan – led by NATO from August 2003. There are two deep-rooted beliefs relating to that effort. The first is that the Alliance lost, or at the very least did not win, the StratCom campaign against the enemy, described as "people operating in caves". The second is that a better information campaign would have enhanced public support amongst domestic audiences of troop-contributing nations, and more dramatically influenced adverse behaviours, thereby improving outcomes on the ground. The ISAF mission showed how a determined enemy with an intimate knowledge of local conditions can execute a successful influence campaign based on matching words with actions, including through deliberate intimidation and violent acts. The campaign was instrumental in impeding reconstruction and development, delaying institutional reforms, slowing the growth of licit business activities, hampering Government capacity building efforts, and swaying NATO troop contributing national audiences.

For the foreseeable future, nations sharing Western values will continue to engage in military conflict or prepare for the same through coalitions or formal Alliances, the pre-eminent of the latter example being NATO. In many quarters ISAF is already being consigned to "yesterday's

war", the campaigns against Daesh and Russia held out to be distinctly different from the counter-insurgency effort against the Taliban. However, after more than a decade of continuous operations, the Afghanistan experience offers abundant evidence indicating a need for changes to doctrine, structure, policy, capabilities, and outputs in order to realize better information-related outcomes in current and future operations, NATO-led or otherwise. In fact, NATO in Afghanistan was a unique preview of the many challenges, requirements and needs to conduct effective inform, influence and persuade activities in contemporary operations. In large measure, this was informed by the transformation of the information environment that occurred over the course of the ISAF campaign period. As Table 1 shows, the ability of individuals or small groups to affect the information space, connect like-minded malign forces, and/or otherwise influence audiences without requiring access to state-owned or state-sponsored communication platforms, has provided non-state actors with exponentially more ability to engage in StratCom activities in little more than a decade.

Table 1. The Information Environment Has Transformed Profoundly (statistics as of October 2015)

Launch of Facebook	February 2004	Facebook claims 968M daily users
Google goes public	August 2004	3.5 billion searches a day
Launch of YouTube mobile	February 2005	300 hrs video uploaded per minute; 1B users; half of views are on mobile
Launch of Twitter	March 2006	Twitter users send 500M Tweets a day
Launch of iPhone/SMS revolution	January 2007	By 2018, one-third of the world's population, or 2.56B people, are expected to own smartphones
Launch of Instagram	October 2010	Claims 400M monthly active users, 80M photos/day
Launch of Snapchat	September 2011	Claims 100M daily users, 5B photo views every day
Mobile phones in Afghanistan		(2004) 500,000, (2015) 23.4 million (51st in world)
Fixed phone lines in Afghanistan		(2004) 85,000, (2015) 100,000 (145th in world)

ISAF also foreshadowed the complexity of communications during modern operations. In terms of time scale, the campaign in Afghanistan has lasted longer than World War I, World War II and the Korean War combined. By virtually any metric it is the longest, most complex, expensive, challenging and fractious operation in NATO's history. The large number of troop contributors with decidedly different national objectives and even different understandings of what the effort was even all about complicated the communications effort like nothing in NATO's experience to date. Communicating about coalition operations against Daesh, or Alliance intentions in the face of Russia's provocations, have already proven to be equally difficult undertakings.

Table 2. Communicating the NATO ISAF Campaign Was Exceedingly Complex

69	The Alliance is 28 members and 41 partners, all with a stake of some sort in the ISAF mission.
51	ISAF Troop Contributing Nations to the ISAF mission in total.
9	Distinct audience groups (NATO members; NATO partners; 3 in Afghanistan [Afghan Government, citizens, and adversaries]; regional actors including Russia, Pakistan, India, and Iraq; defence and security stakeholders including think-tanks; international agencies such as the UN and World Bank; and, the continually changing ISAF internal audience.)
6	NATO strategic and operational-level HQs (NATO HQ, Allied Command Operations, Allied Command Transformation, Joint Force Command Brunssum, ISAF, and ISAF Joint Command HQ).
5	Main information-related disciplines (Public Diplomacy, military Public Affairs, civilian Public Affairs, Psychological Operations, Information Operations), defined by NATO as constituting StratCom.
4	Different but related, and concurrent communication campaigns (NATO HQ to nations; ISAF HQ to Afghans; NATO nations to their own national audiences and to other NATO nations; insurgents).
3	Communication components (each message requires a sender, a message, and a receiver) and three types of communication (at strategic, operational and tactical levels).
2	Missions, ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom, simultaneously being conducted in the same operational space and, in the case of the latter, by several NATO members as well, as if Afghans or domestic NATO audiences could differentiate between them. This bifurcated command structure and the consequences of that on the ability to coordinate effort in theatre was the single most damaging aspect to NATO credibility in the entire campaign.
1	ISAF was one operation amongst many things underway at NATO. Through the height of ISAF, the number of distinct NATO missions was 11 (including Pakistan earthquake relief, support to the African Union, maritime surveillance in the Mediterranean, and the Libyan air campaign). During that same period, there were 5 NATO Summits: Riga 2006, Bucharest 2008, Strasbourg/Kehl 2009, Lisbon 2010 and Chicago 2012.

These momentous changes in the information and operating environments have profound implications for how public diplomacy, public affairs and psychological operations are conducted, and how information operations and StratCom are meant to affect coordination of Alliance, coalition, or national communications during 'routine' and 'operational' periods. For instance, counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen calculated that a Vietnamese villager in 1966 would have had 10 sources of information available to him/her, almost half being in the control of government. In contrast, Kilcullen estimated that the Afghan villager in 2006 had 25 such sources (counting the Internet as one), with just five being controlled by the government. Most of the rest, including e-mail, satellite phones and text messaging, are independent but were more easily exploited by insurgents than by the Afghan Government.

Digital disrupts decisively. The internet and social media enable audiences worldwide to follow Western military activities from the political to the very tactical level in near real-time. This enables adversaries to message directly to target audiences without a media filter.

There were tectonic shifts, more broadly speaking, in the operating environment as well. As Table 3 shows, a comparison of the first and most recent of large-scale NATO ground force deployments in the Balkans and Afghanistan illustrates the operational environment has changed completely in just two decades.

Table 3. The Operating Environment Has Also Transformed

NATO in the Balkans (Dec. 1996)	NATO in Afghanistan (End-ISAF, Dec. 2014)
16 nations, some partners (little commitment)	28 nations, 41 partners (many with real commitment)
No out-of- area operations	Major operations in Europe and 3 other continents
Western Europe/North America focus	Global focus
Adversaries had ineffective info campaigns	Adversaries have sophisticated info campaigns
Media distributes info to 'general public'	Media is but one of many channels to reach 'general public'
No direct reach to intended message recipient possible	Direct communication with intended audiences possible
Little feedback from intended audiences	Problem is one of how to manage volume of feedback
Little media interaction with mil forces on ops	Robust embedded media programs
Social media means friendly journalists	Social media has tactical, operational and strategic applications

These are fundamental changes to the information and operational space that call for dramatically new approaches and structures with respect to *how* Western militaries (and governments) communicate, and more importantly, how they *organize* themselves to communicate. Amongst the considerable array of prognosticators, none are suggesting that the future security environment is going to get less complicated than it is now. Recent experience suggests that the future will be just as unpredictable, and military operations requiring the use of a lot of lethal force will be a continuous theme. A number of conclusions can be drawn from these developments that directly relate to strategic communications in contemporary and future operations, of which 5 are particularly pronounced:

1. The new norm is a variety of political-military partnerships outside traditional groups of like-minded nations, on operations where most Western forces do not necessarily have considerable recent experience.

Defence- and security-focused campaigns are increasingly complex undertakings featuring more actors, and more unfamiliar actors. The Afghanistan mission, for instance, at its height brought together 50 troop contributing nations, more than a quarter of the world's countries. The counter-Daesh effort binds a global coalition of 64 nations plus the institutional support of the EU and Arab League, in effect assisting and bolstering the Assad regime in Syria – circumstances that transpired in less than a year and were further complicated by the

introduction of Russian military forces in October 2015. Canada's contribution to the coalition Middle East Stabilization Force includes helping train, advise and assist Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq, parts of a mix of activities not on anyone's radar even two years ago.

Structured partnerships are a key element of NATO's – as well as Canada's – cooperative security core tasks. The Alliance's Strategic Concept notes that, "the promotion of Euro-Atlantic security is best assured through a wide network of partner relationships with countries and organizations around the globe." Notably, the Arab League includes six of the seven countries of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (Israel being the exception). NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative includes four countries from the Gulf region, all of whom belong to the Arab League. A new NATO 'partners around the globe' initiative includes Iraq. And, at the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO announced the Partnership Interoperability Initiative of 24 partners, a diverse group ranging from Mongolia to the Republic of Korea, as well as four Arab League members.

In sum, operational activities for the conceivable future will be multi-faceted, against non-state actors in multiple locations by diverse groups of military and non-military participants. Put mildly, this constitutes a considerable challenge for all national, coalition and Allied forces who, in return for broad public support of the forces even if not for the mission itself, are obliged to publicly report on operations and to explain their participation and progress.

2. The information space is being shaped long before forces are constituted and deployed.

"Events" seemingly emerge with alarming rapidity, though usually there is a slow build of long-standing grievances underpinning bad relations until a situation finally erupts into open conflict. By then, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours amongst parties directly or indirectly in conflict are well and truly set. The speed by which capabilities are now expected to be deployed puts an inherent value on high-readiness standing forces. This continues to be demonstrated time and again, most recently during the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector campaign over Libya, the deployment of troops by some Western nations to fight Ebola in Sierra Leone, and coalition operations against Daesh. The rapidity of deployment and employment are 'standard' characteristics of future forces, implying a host of embedded, integrated capabilities to be successful.

It is now an easy and cheap exercise for malign individuals or groups to observe, comment and get directly involved in fomenting actions and reactions. To have effect in the influence and strategic communications domains, credibility of the intervening force will be key, and this can be won or lost even as the conflict takes early form. The luxury of building information-related capability over several years, as was the case for ISAF, should not be taken as a given. In Afghanistan, it took six years before sufficient military forces, including for StratCom, would be deployed in theatre to start to make a positive difference on the ground: until then, any effort at an influence campaign with Afghans in country or an inform campaign with domestic audiences in NATO troop contributing nations was seriously compromised.

Trust and relationships are built over time through understanding and ideally, face-to-face or 'on scene' engagement. That is, connections, relationships and networks leading to greater two-way understanding need to be well established with media, think-tanks and civil society (country, regional or global) before conflicts erupt.

In today's information environment, the inform, influence and persuade functions should be as instrumental to the force package (and thus resourced, with real capabilities) as the standing- and rapid response deploy, fight, and sustain elements.

3. There is a premium on Public Diplomacy activities.

Strategic Communications – whether one considers it to be a mindset, a process, a capability or some combination of the three – within NATO includes five elements: military public affairs, civilian public affairs, psychological operations, information operations, and public diplomacy. Of these, it is the latter where national capabilities and capacity are the most wanting ... just when they are most needed. Audiences are now global and incredibly diverse, and may well have recently been 'against us'. Establishing the conditions for deeper understanding and engagement means considerably more effort is required than a department or organization translating a few story features for the Web into one or two other languages. Instead, it calls for a major re-think about how to more effectively engage with audiences and civil society regarding the role and place of national, NATO Alliance or coalition operations that are taking place on a global scale.

Since 1997 for instance, NATO has conducted operations directly assisting Muslim populations in seven non-member countries (eight including NATO member Turkey) – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, the African Union missions in Darfur (Sudan) and Somalia, and Libya, as well as off the Horn of Africa – yet there are no NATO information offices in the Middle East, Asia, or Africa. Oddly though, NATO's two information offices are in Kiev and Moscow, where opinions about NATO are pretty fixed.

Seen through just the prism of military operations, everything will look like a military problem. A nation or Alliance with global partners regularly engaged in operations outside its members' borders should wish to more directly engage with target audiences with non-military capabilities far more actively than is now the case.

4. Adversaries will be very skilled at the use of modern media, and Allies face unique constraints.

Gaining attention is made considerably easier when truth is not a factor in malign actor communications and visual impact is. Adversaries are likely to own or have access to significant means of content production and will put information effect at the heart of their campaign. This includes mass murder or visually appalling actions in the case of Daesh and its offshoots, while with Russia we are witness to a coordinated 'blitzkrieg' of activities across a wide front, including

major investments in quality television programming and robust troll farms used to prosecute the social media campaign. Unless countered by an equally intense and focused effort, adversary actions will generally be regarded as successful in the main.

In contrast, coalescing the coalition (or Alliance) around a single narrative and focusing communications effort outward will be a real challenge. Coalition members operate with different rule sets governing public information, and 'openness and transparency' is likely not to be a watchword or operational philosophy for all. Further, as always with multiple partners, the level of commitment and capabilities will vary significantly – and some may not wish to even be publically identified with the effort.

5. Communications campaigns require a major, multi-disciplinary, professional, mil-civ StratCom effort.

The change in the information and operating environments have made communication campaigns far more complicated than in years past. Still, influence activities are rarely likely to be short-term efforts, as the duration of the Cold War attests. To detect, counter, develop, and disseminate national, NATO or coalition information – and to counter opponent information activities or deny them access – is an increasingly complicated sub-component of operations that calls for a range of capabilities that can, at the very least, react to the news cycle (understanding that ideally, one would rather wish to drive the news cycle). The effort, at many levels global in nature, will require new suites of capabilities to effectively engage, inform, influence, and persuade – in a manner that is increasingly coordinated and joined up.

That work demands professional operational communicators, both military and civilian, that are also expeditionary. NATO HQ and the Alliance of 28 member nations are all only now demonstrably more capable in terms of experience, capabilities, policy and processes from a strategic communications perspective, of dealing with a contemporary counter-insurgency after many years of effort in Afghanistan. Currently, there is a decided lack of national, expeditionary capability in NATO (excluding the US and perhaps Germany) in all five disciplines of public diplomacy, civilian public affairs, military public affairs, information operations and psychological operations, as well as the integrating element of strategic communications. In this regard, Canada, once a leader in this field, now lags behind several of its Allies.

The lack of fit-for-purpose doctrine or updated and integrated information policy, and the limited deployable capability in the various information disciplines at each rank level suggests that NATO as an organization and most of its constituent nations are not currently well equipped to deal effectively in that space when faced with asymmetric or hybrid threats.

THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Include expeditionary national military capability in all disciplines of strategic communications as a requirement in the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), which is the means by which needed capabilities are identified and committed by nations to NATO. Nations, in turn, should take steps to professionalize information-related capabilities including in their military forces, and in a joint, expeditionary civilian-military capacity.

2. Surge all national and NATO operations and information-related doctrine and policy requirements at once, including Allied Joint Publications, Military Committee Policies, Allied Command Operations Directives, and thence the various training handbooks and courses, to obtain a unified baseline that can stand for several years.

3. Provide resources to enhance communications and outreach activities with audiences in the regions that nations and NATO operates from or may be expected to operate from in the future, including the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

SUMMARY

Malign actors are currently more able to exploit the information environment to their advantage. Nations should not put faith and trust into a laissez-faire strategy that hopes opponents will do comparatively worse in the communication campaigns and fight to influence audiences. The information environment has transformed, the operational environment has been fundamentally altered, and the future security environment will continue to be more chaotic and confused. These three indubitable truths should inform how to evolve national and NATO approaches to StratCom to help realize better operational outcomes.

As in the NATO experience in Afghanistan, the notion that the West is "losing" information campaigns in contemporary operations is a common but often misplaced view. The litany of extant communications shortcomings is important to fix, but that alone is too simple a calculus. On its own, StratCom does not erase the outcomes of bad policy and poor operational execution. Where policy and operations are well connected and showing results, StratCom can amplify that effect. Where policy and operations are weak, negative outcomes can be mitigated but not overcome. Improving StratCom effects must start with better policy, greater understanding of audiences including motivations, conducting operations following established and successful military principles, and skilled practitioners.

▶ About the Author

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