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Squaring the Circle: The Evolution of NATO's Strategic Communication Since the 1990s

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Abstract: This article examines the development of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) approach to strategic communications. It argues that while over the past thirty years the Alliance has produced an effective Strategic Communications (StratCom) institutional framework and set of policies, its dual nature as a military and political multinational organization has prevented the creation of a unified narrative to underpin its strategic communication effort. The article considers key turning points to examine the development of NATO StratCom. It starts with the aerial campaign in Kosovo (1998-1999), which caused unprecedented levels of scrutiny from the western media and public. The process received further impetus following the establishment of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan a decade later. The launch of the ISAF Communication Directorate was a huge leap forward at the tactical level. However, it was the occupation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine in 2014 that led to a proper coordination of all strategic communication activities across the Alliance in 2017. Today, capability building and the lack of a clear vision and effective narrative continue to affect the Alliance's information effort.

Keywords: NATO; SHAPE; Strategic Communications; ISAF; Kosovo.

Introduction

Before the aerial campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) did not have a strategic communication policy worthy of its name. Following the engagement in Kosovo (1998-1999), the Alliance carried out a radical review of its communication strategy. The process received further impetus following the establishment of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan a decade later. Strategic Communications (StratCom) were formally incorporated into NATO strategy in response to the occupation of Crimea of 2014 and it has been expanding ever since.

Through the analysis of official documents produced at key turning points over the past thirty years, this article examines the development of the Alliance's approach to strategic communication with a particular focus on the attempt to develop an overarching narrative and a coherent framework to deliver effective communication campaigns.

StratCom: A Challenge for NATO

There is no consensus on what strategic communication is or how it should be implemented. It is, however, agreed that successful strategic communication influences

target audiences sufficiently to cause them to change or maintain their behavior. As a result, an effective approach to strategic communication must be based on the formulation and execution of plans that are coherent with each other and which support the delivery of a defined overarching intent.[1] A successful strategic communication strategy relies on a unified and coherent narrative, which allow the organization to adapt its information programs to different mediums, multiple target audiences, and the changing developing environment without inconsistencies and conflicting messaging.[2] As explained below, the search for a coherent narrative to underpin NATO communication strategy is further complicated by the fact that the Alliance is both a political and military organization that brings together allied and partner nations. It is also challenging because of the competing goals, priorities, and practices of all the parties involved. The political side of the Alliance prioritizes building public trust and support for NATO's goals across multiple audiences and through different mediums, which range from press conferences at the end of high-profile events to daily updates via social media. In this context, political messaging must reinforce a coherent and convincing narrative about NATO's mission and the role of the Alliance in the global security architecture. The military side, on the other hand, focuses primarily on how to integrate communications into strategic planning and operations, at strategic, operational, and tactical levels, and ensures that the message is clear and coherent, and the chain of command is able to oversee its application in all its contexts.[3] Yet, despite all these differences, the two spheres must move in the same direction and have complementary actionable goals. There must be an overarching coherent narrative and vision to bind all the actors together and to drive them in the same direction.

In NATO, the term is used in its plural form: Strategic Communications (StratCom) to reflect the complex nature of the Alliance as a multinational military and political organization that aims to coordinate the information effort of multiple actors and agencies across different sectors. NATO StratCom is defined as "the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities—Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations, and Psychological Operations, as appropriate—in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims."[4]

Kosovo: A Wake-Up Call

NATO's strategic communication has always aimed to promote of public awareness of the Alliance's objectives as it is believed that a better understanding of what NATO does and how it works would in turn lead to stronger support of its policies, operations, and other activities.

During the Cold War, the NATO Information Service and the NATO Press Office informed the public about the North Atlantic Treaty and the Alliance's collective defense objectives. However, at the time, NATO was not operational. This meant that the primary aim of the information effort was restricted to maintaining public support for the Alliance

and the collective defense effort. NATO's information campaigns reiterated that the Alliance was a political and military association of like-minded nations determined to defend themselves from the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, whose aggressive posture was a threat.[5] Relations with the media did not go beyond press releases and the occasional press conference at the end of high-profile meetings. Crucially, military leaders—both the Military Committee at the NATO Headquarters (HQ) in Brussels and the Command Groups at the operational HQs—were not involved in the information campaigns and never dealt with the media directly.[6] In fact, throughout the Cold War, there was no military strategic communication worth of its name. This reflected a common phenomenon of that era: military authorities in the western nations did not engage with the concept of StratCom and often considered it as something removed from their core duties.[7]

At the time of the Kosovo campaign, the NATO HQ in Brussels opened its gates to the media for the first time.[8] Of course, the operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina a few years earlier had already offered a glimpse of what the transition to operations meant from the point of view of media and public relations. However, the engagement in Bosnia Herzegovina was a limited air campaign, which lasted only a few weeks and did not prepare the NATO information officers for what Kosovo would bring.[9]

Kosovo was a steep learning curve for all parties involved. The journalists had to find their way among the intricacies of NATO's operational jargon and a multitude of acronyms as well as to understand its complex multinational decision-making processes.[10] Crucially, the NATO information officials did not anticipate the level of scrutiny from the western media. They also failed to anticipate the Serbian ability to exploit the information war. It was no longer possible to issue "no comment" statements and to speak casually of "collateral damage."[11] NATO was scrutinized for its actions and for the financial and human cost of the operation as well as for the legality of the operations. It was essential to be as open as possible about the developments on the ground to ensure that the journalists could report accurately. This, however, had to be done without the risk of jeopardizing ongoing operations.

In the initial phase, the lack of leadership and clear visions of NATO's priority in the field of communication undermined the information effort. Priority was given to operational effectiveness, which meant that as little information as possible about tactical progress and operational plans was divulged. This approach often resulted in blunders that severely undermined the Alliance's credibility and public support. A good example was the attack on the passenger train at the Grdelica Gorge, on April 12, 1999. NATO targeted the Leskovac railway bridge because it was part of a re-supply route used by Serb forces. A passenger train was crossing the bridge at the time and was struck by two missiles. According to General Wesley Clark (Supreme Allied Commander Europe, SACEUR) and Jamie Shea (NATO spokesperson), the train had been travelling fast across the gorge and the pilot did not have time to react in time.[12] Controversy arose after it emerged that a video released to support NATO's version of the events had been sped up three times.[13] Similarly, the bombing of the

Djakovica Convoy two days later exposed similar inconsistencies. NATO initially denied, but later had to acknowledge, the attack. Even more damningly was the fact that NATO was forced to admit that the aircraft had been flying at an altitude of 15,000 feet and the pilots had identified the target with the naked eye rather than remotely.[14]

One of the key problems for the NATO information officers at the time was that the Alliance's involvement was purely based on aerial operations, and therefore its officers could only produce images taken from fighter planes and maps, which were of little use to non-specialists and failed to capture the imagination of the public. The Alliance was often unable to respond effectively to the requests for information coming from the journalists particularly as far as the impact of the bombings was concerned. However, reporters on the ground and Tanjug (the Yugoslavian news agency) published pictures and videos of the devastation, which caused furor among the western public and were easily exploited by the Serbian leaders. When all the major western broadcasters began to report regularly from Serbia, NATO's inability to provide first-hand information from the ground left its media team exposed to criticism and lack of transparency.[15]

At the time, NATO military leaders were reluctant to participate in the press briefing. When they did participate, their answers were often short and technical.[16] This was partially due to the lack of media training and partially to their reluctance to comment on ongoing operations. Soon, tensions built within the Alliance: information officers at the political headquarters in Brussels wanted to prevent a negative story to occupy the media space for too long because of lack of information provided by NATO, while the military leaders at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons were less invested and prioritized operations on the ground. Jamie Shea, who was NATO spokesperson at the time, found the attitude of his colleagues at SHAPE deeply frustrating. He recalls that "they did not know how important the media was."[17] Relations between the two headquarters became increasingly tense to the point that Shea established his own network of contacts to be informed personally and outside the formal chain of command about how the campaign was developing and what would come next. This, Shea recalls, was the only way for him to know what the military command was doing.[18]

One additional complication for NATO was its multinational nature. The campaign in Kosovo was controversial and public opinion was divided. National governments were cautious, at times bordering on suspicious, about any move to strengthen NATO's communication policy as they wanted to retain total control over how the war effort was communicated to their own public.

With the agreement of the member nations, NATO's strategic communication campaign aimed at harnessing public support across all member nations. It did so by creating a narrative about the need for the international community to intervene in Kosovo to protect human rights and it identified NATO as the only organization able to do. The narrative effectively linked the operation in Kosovo to the failure to act a few years earlier in Bosnia,

which had led to the Srebrenica Massacre (1995).[19]

NATO's information officers consistently stressed the humanitarian nature of the mission and the need to have a strong military component to support the diplomatic effort. By doing so, NATO pushed forward two complementary visions: to justify its action in Kosovo in the name of human rights and to legitimize the continuation of its own existence as a viable organization for the post-Cold War security environment.[20]

ISAF: A Catalyst

If Kosovo was a wake-up call, Afghanistan was a catalyst for the establishment of a coherent NATO StratCom policy. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan, was launched in 2001.[21]

Since the beginning, ISAF faced an enormous challenge both in terms of security and defense operation as well as in terms of strategic communications. Brett Boudreau, a former Canadian military public affairs officer, has written a detailed account of how ISAF initially failed to set clear information priorities and goals and how the Coalition struggled to agree a way forward.[22] In Afghanistan, the Taliban used information as a critical strategic tool, whose effectiveness was enhanced by a strong, coherent narrative in which foreign troops were portrayed as occupying forces that wanted to make Afghanistan a godless pawn of the West.[23] In the words of the UK Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, as far as the information effort was involved, the Taliban "have beaten us to the punch on numerous occasions, and by doing so they have magnified the sense of difficulty and diminished the sense of progress."[24] The Coalition failed to capture the imagination of the local population. A limited understanding of the culture, language, and customs of Afghanistan was certainly an obstacle. But the real problem was the lack of a real communication strategy and of a clear narrative.[25]

Many nations had joined ISAF as a peacekeeping mission but soon got entangled in a full-spectrum counter-insurgency operation, which often meant death among their troops that deeply undermined public support at home. National government provided different explanations of why their forces had been sent to Afghanistan and what they hoped to achieve. The narratives ranged from the fight against international terrorism to the attempt to support the development of Afghan democracy and the rights of women. As a result, ISAF did not have a convincing overarching narrative, which significantly undermined its ability to engage the public of the NATO nations. Rather than having a unified narrative, there was a multitude of perspectives and views.[26] For the same reason, there was also no coordination of messaging with the ISAF partners (the Afghan government, non-government organizations [NGOs], aid agencies, the United Nations, and the European Union). The lack of coherence was compounded by the regular rotation of personnel, which led to loss of an already limited expertise, and fragmentation of effort.[27]

Finally, a further complication was that for much of the campaign, most of the U.S. troops remained outside ISAF. They were deployed on Operation Enduring Freedom and therefore were under a different command structure, with a commander sitting in Bagram, not in Kabul. He was answerable to the commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) in Tampa, Florida, not to SACEUR at SHAPE in Belgium. Journalists, whether local or international, did not know whom to call to check on reports of incidents. The fact that the public affairs teams in each command had to clear what could be released and ensure consistency of messaging with other commands caused further delays and frustration. It was not until the second part of General David McKiernan's tour in 2008 that the ISAF commander became double-hatted as commander of Operation Enduring Freedom as well. This decision improved the information coordination efforts.[28]

A new approach to strategic communications was needed, both in terms of policies as well as in terms of the skills and training of the people who would apply such policies. There was no room for improvisation: NATO had to recruit top-level information specialists to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the new global information environment and to respond effectively to the Taliban communication assault.[29] Mark Laity, who first visited ISAF as SHAPE's Chief of Public Affairs, recalls that at that point ISAF's "structures, policies, doctrines and processes tended to marginalize communications both within the disciplines and from the wider headquarters. Our training was woeful with, too often, good people thrown in to learn on the job, trying to pick up skills unrelated to the common experience of most military officers. Concepts such as Strategic Narrative were little appreciated, our ability to understand cultures, and how to speak to them even less so."[30]

A key figure in Afghanistan was Lieutenant General Ton van Loon (NL). Formerly Commander of Region Command South in Kandahar in 2007, van Loon was convinced of the centrality of StratCom in modern warfare. When he became commander of 1 (DEU/ NL) Corps in 2010, he created a Communication and Engagement Division, the first of its kind in ISAF. The new D division prefigured the structures required for this kind of mission and offered a blueprint for document MC 0628, which was agreed by NATO seven years later and which laid the foundation of what is now NATO StratCom as it is today.[31]

In June 2009, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal arrived as the new Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) and famously argued that "winning the battle of perception is key […] we win when the people decide we win."[32] McChrystal immediately pushed toward deeper and better synchronization of the Coalition's strategic communication effort. In his COMISAF Initial Assessment, McChrystal included the need for a fundamental change of culture in how ISAF approached operations and argued that "StratCom should not be a separate Line of Operation, but rather an integral and fully embedded part of policy development, planning processes, and the execution of operations. Analyzing and maximizing StratCom effects must be central to the formulation of schemes of maneuver and during the execution of operations."[33] McChrystal created the ISAF Communication Directorate under a 2-star officer charged to "plan, coordinate, execute, and assess all Strategic Communication efforts, including Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations throughout the Combined Joint Area of Operations".[34]

In his approach to strategic communications, McChrystal referred to the extensive development that the discipline had already undergone in the United States, where StratCom had become a well-established discipline since the publication in 2006 of *QDR Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communications*.[35] Significantly, a few months before his appointment as the new SACEUR, Admiral James Stavridis also wrote in strong terms about the crucial importance of strategic communications for military strategy and planning. Stavridis also argued in favor of the need to adjust the strategy and the policies to multiple audiences and mediums.[36] The military and political context was therefore ripe for McChrystal's action in Afghanistan.

In the history of NATO StratCom, the decisions taken by van Loon and McChrystal meant that most of the core principles and features of MC 0628, the 2017 document that laid the foundations of NATO StratCom, were already preconfigured at the operational level in 2009. The next step was to convince the political and military leaders of the Alliance of the importance of coordination and synchronization of all information operations to enhance effectiveness and to maximize synergies at the strategic level.

However, while the decisions of van Loon and McChrystal did provide a framework and a strategy, they did not provide a narrative to underpin the strategic communication effort. This should have been formulated by political leaders at the NATO HQ and in the capitals of the member nations. However, a unifying vision never materialized as each nation shifted the focus of their messaging on ISAF from counter-insurgency to the fight against international terrorism and ISAF as a peace building operation.[37]

At NATO, the process moved forward with the creation of NATO Public Affairs in 2007[38] and received further impetus at the 2009 Summit when it was officially recognized at the highest level that "strategic communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives."[39] On 29 September 2009, the North Atlantic Council approved the NATO StratCom Policy, which brought together Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs and Military Public Affairs functions along with Information Operations and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS).[40] By publishing the Policy, the Alliance recognized the importance of a timely and accurate communication strategy as an integral tool to achieve its political and military objectives. It was the beginning of the birth of NATO StratCom. The 2009 StratCom Policy pointed to the need to raise the level of cohesion of the Alliance information policies and practices, both military and civilian, to improve its communication with multiple target audiences with optimal use of resources and maximum coherence of message.[41]

By the end of the following year, under the direction of Stavridis, the new NATO Military Concept for Strategic Communications enabled the development of new capabilities within NATO's military forces and structures. It was formally recognized that strategic communication must not be an afterthought in any stage of the planning and operational processes, but it must be at the core of the discussions. It also stressed the need for trained

professionals within the armed forces to carry out these functions. Crucially, the Concept tasked Allied Command Operations (ACO) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT) to begin a capability development program.[42]

The NATO Military Concept for StratCom published in 2011 identified the military components of StratCom and their specific areas of responsibility, with a comprehensive assessment of the specialist requirements in terms of personnel, organization, and assets. The most important step that resulted from the Concept document was the fact that both ACO and ACT established StratCom Branches in their Command Groups, thus working closely with the Supreme Allied Commander Europe at SHAPE and the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation at ACT. As a follow-up, ACT also developed a NATO StratCom Capabilities Implementation Plan to assist the nations in building a capability across the StratCom disciplines. The Capabilities Implementation Plan provides detailed guidance to NATO Commanders to assist them in defining strategic, actionable goals, and to produce clear, guidelines and priorities for all information officials across the Alliance.[43]

Around the same time, Operation Unified Protector (Libya) and NATO's annual Crisis Management Exercises reinforced the need for clear StratCom Policy Joint Implementation Guidelines (JIGs), which were then incorporated as an annex to the StratCom Policy document of 2009.[44]

By 2011, the concept of StratCom had become embedded in NATO's political and military thinking as a process. Yet, StratCom was not a coordinating function within NATO and several member nations remained skeptical about a strong, centralized communication agency within NATO.

NATO's First Military Policy on Strategic Communications

In 2014, the occupation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine demonstrated that the Russians made effective use of information to disrupt and deceive. This could take the form of trolling, disinformation, and false narratives, to mislead or to control. It was clear that the Russian use of information was not an improvised effort, but a fully integrated part of the overall strategy.[45]

The Russian use of information and disinformation gave NATO the same shock at the political-military level that the Taliban had given ISAF at the operational level a decade earlier.[46] In the 2014 Summit Communique, NATO's leaders stated their commitment to "enhancing Strategic Communications,"[47] which accelerated the path toward further coordination and unity of effort. The result was NATO Military Policy on Strategic Communication (MC 0628) of 2017.

MC 0628 is both a tool and a concept. The new approach was agreed by SHAPE in August 2017, in a policy statement defining StratCom as "the integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to

understand and shape the information environment in support of NATO aims and objectives."[48] At the same time, the establishment of the NATO-accredited Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia supported the coordination effort.[49]

MC 0628 put forward two key principles to underpin the NATO Strategic Communication policy. First, the recognition of the specificity of military strategic communication policy in terms of goals, best practices, priorities, and recruitment of specialists. Second, the understanding that political and military communications are different, yet complementary. MC 0628 stated clearly that two must move in the same direction and have complementary actionable goals. Crucially, MC 0628 called for the creation of an institutional framework to achieve effective coordination and to facilitate interaction.[50] From a military point of view, it was also acknowledged that StratCom is primarily a process and not an organization or a function. In a military context, NATO Military StratCom must be seen as a means to integrate information and communication functions into the strategic and operational planning to enhance tactical presence on the ground in kinetic operations both internally (your own military forces) and externally (adversaries and civilians).[51] Crucially, it envisages the inclusion of StratCom in operational planning from the earliest stages of any crisis or operation.[52] In the words of Stavridis, "For a combatant commander, the place to "organize" strategic communication is at the operational level".[53]

Following the approval of MC 0628, the military committee has approved a new military public affairs policy (MC 0457/3), which defines military public affairs in NATO as "the capability responsible for promoting NATO's military aims and objectives by communicating accurate information in a timely manner to various audiences. This communication enhances awareness and understanding of the military aspects of the Alliance's role, aims, operations, missions, activities and issues, thereby reinforcing its organisational credibility."[54] NATO has introduced training standards for military public affairs that include pre-assignment training and experience standards. Crucially, military public affairs capabilities are now targeted in the NATO Defense Planning.[55]

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since 2017, NATO and SHAPE have put in place a clear plan for effective strategic communications, which includes a clear institutional framework and chain of command. StratCom is today an important part of the strategic and operational thinking at as it is demonstrated by the fact that the Communication Division works in close contact with the SACEUR, the Deputy SACEUR and the Command Group.[56] Yet, NATO StratCom continues to be a process and not a function in itself. This means that it aims primarily to facilitate and streamline the integration of the existing information and communication functions of military and political agencies at national and alliance level. There is the risk that this function could simply interpose another layer of coordination without adding value. Ultimately, the initiative remains in the hands of the political leaders at the HQ in Brussels and in the capital of the member nations.

Nations have their own StratCom agencies and plans and they naturally prioritize their own national interests, concerns, and sensitivities. This can lead to a fragmented discourse, duplication of effort, and to inconsistencies. As argued elsewhere, this is an issue that has affected the development of NATO's communication and information policies since the foundation of the Alliance.[57] However, if NATO and its nations want to produce an effective StratCom effort, they must coordinate their work more effectively. Closer coordination should have two complementary aims. It should produce a convincing narrative and coherent vision of NATO's mission and goals to underpin its StratCom and to appeal to all target audiences. It should also bring tighter coordination between the NATO HQs and the national agencies with the aim of achieving greater effectiveness and coherence of messaging.

Finally, it is essential to recruit experienced StratCom advisors, who must have a deep understanding of both military and political tasks of the Alliance and who can work across multiple disciplines and audiences. According to a recent SHAPE document: "Although there is some capacity within NATO and the Nations to educate and train military PAOs [Public Affairs Officers], this is insufficient to meet the growing demand. Furthermore, there is limited capacity within NATO and only a few nations to educate and train military PAOs. This is insufficient to meet the operational requirement of trained communicators."[58]

NATO StratCom continues to be an evolving discipline. The launch of MC 0628 has marked an acceleration in the coordination process of military StratCom. It has created a vision for the future with clear and effective processes that facilitate and streamline—rather than simply coordinate or even hamper—Alliance-wide information and communications efforts. The challenge that remains is to create a coherent and unifying narrative that is shared by all allied nations and that underpins the content of StratCom in all its forms.

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Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation,* 73-78.
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