
Enabling Strategic Communication at the Combatant Commands

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Editorial Abstract: Colonels Perkins and Scott examine the complexities of building effective Strategic Communications organizations and messages, methodologies for synchronization and effective employment, and recent case studies in the Central Command and European Command areas of operation.

“Strategic Communication is vital to US national security and foreign policy. We are engaged in a global struggle of ideas similar in magnitude to what we faced throughout half the twentieth century. Succeeding in this struggle requires leadership from the President down.”

-- Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication

As the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff and its Interagency partners continue to examine and codify the Strategic Communication process, the Combatant Commands (COCOM) are certainly interested in this evolving process. Specifically, they are concerned with how Interagency policies and guidance on Strategic Communication (SC) will be vetted and synchronized with Combatant Commands’ planning activities, and how best to effectively analyze and tailor theater-specific SC efforts. A key question to address is what operating principles might help facilitate the smooth and effective execution of SC at the operational- and tactical-levels of the Combatant Commands? During the course of this article, we will examine seven principles for enabling Strategic Communication activities within the joint operational community. These principles are grouped into three areas: Interagency requirements; synchronizing methods; and analytical processing. The combined effect of the seven principles is synchronized Strategic Communication activities between the Combatant Commands to the national level, which not only allows the US Government to stay on message, but perhaps anticipate

crises requiring a coherent Strategic Communication response.

INTERAGENCY REQUIREMENTS

The very definition of Strategic Communication shows the importance of the combined capabilities of the Interagency. The current draft of Enclosure B, Strategic Communication, in JOPES Volume 1, defines Strategic Communication as “transmission of integrated and coordinated US Government themes, messages, and actions that advance US interests and policies through a synchronized Interagency effort.” It consists of Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, military Information Operations components, and special activities. Supportive US government policies and active, forward-leaning Interagency involvements is fundamental to the Combatant Commander’s ability to develop coherent and comprehensive plans and programs, including Strategic Communication execution.

US Government Policy

For Combatant Commanders to successfully implement Strategic

Communication, they must have an unequivocal definition of the overall US Government policy in dealing with a particular issue or regional objective. This does not require a “mechanistic, military-intensive, and Washington-centric” solution, but there is a requirement for overarching top-down direction. This point is also applicable to organizations providing direct support to Combatant Commands. For example, the Joint Information Operations Center (JIOC) recently led an Information Operations seminar in conjunction with key governmental representatives including US Southern Command and the Joint Special Operations University. Their task was to develop long-term Information Operations themes in concert with the US Government position on Cuba. During the two-day seminar, they clearly demonstrated the value of the Interagency process when the State Department representatives ensured the working group’s courses of action remained aligned with overall US Government policy on Cuba. The US Southern Command is now assured of a thoroughly vetted and unified Department of State and Department of Defense Strategic Communication approach to advance long-term US interests in Central America.

Interagency Involvement

While having a clear US Government policy directing Combatant Commands' activities is paramount for successful accomplishment of military operations, it is also necessary for Combatant Commanders to receive mission-type orders from the Interagency Community. The Department of Defense, and specifically the Joint Staff, the Under Secretary of Defense (Policy), and the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) are the primary conduits to the Interagency, and all must actively participate in these ongoing and important policy discussions. The US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) also has an active role in this integration process based upon its Unified Command Plan responsibilities. Once the US Government position is ascertained and coordinated with the myriad executive departments, the Secretary of Defense will issue mission-type execution orders to Combatant Commands. These orders must include requisite background information on the tie-in to national security strategy and national military strategy, along with theater-specific Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs themes for dissemination, to achieve applicable US policy objectives in the region. The guidance should cover "what" themes and possible messages to communicate, but not "how" to communicate them. Additionally, mission-type orders should include three critical items: specific targets sets (e.g., leaders, media outlets, general population, etc); the effect(s) desired (e.g., what do we want the target audience to do?); and required timelines for accomplishment of the effects. These guidance elements are essential to ensure the Combatant Commands understand the true intent of the US Government policy and objectives, enable the IO/SC planners to focus and prioritize their Strategic Communication efforts, and best employ scarce communications resources.

SYNCHRONIZING METHODS

Having a stated US Government policy and Interagency involvement



Synchronizing every step (DefenseLink)

provides direction to the Information Operations/Strategic Communication planners, but a critical need exists to ensure the synchronization, planning and execution of the various components of the Strategic Communication process.

Synchronization

The Interagency community must ensure that coordinated, overarching communication themes are integrated across the entire US Government enterprise. The intent of Strategic Communication is to create a coherent US Government message by simultaneously coordinating the vertical organizations in the Department of Defense, with parallel coordination across the Interagency horizontal structure. If one executive department or key organization does not participate or fully support the synchronization process, it can lead to a disjointed Strategic Communication effort and failure to meet US Government policy goals.

A case in point, Mr. Jeff Jones, the former Senior Director for Strategic Communication and Information on the US National Security Council, was instrumental along with the Joint Staff in helping formulate the initial US Government communication policy for the Middle East. US Central Command (USCENTCOM) created a Strategic Communication entity within its Tampa-

based command headquarters to leverage US Government guidance to focus Strategic Communication activities, primarily in Iraq and to a lesser degree in Afghanistan. These early efforts were useful in coordinating communication themes for implementation in Iraq. With the departure of Mr. Jones in 2004, no single Interagency entity is currently directing the overall US Government communication strategy on Iraq during the crucial effort to establish a viable, representative Iraqi government. In the absence of continuing communication guidance on Iraq from the US National Security Council, US Central Command directed Multi-National Force-Iraq to assume the Strategic Communication integration role with their respective counterparts in the newly established US Embassy in Baghdad. Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) and the embassy coordinated their Strategic Communication actions to ensure Coalition forces, the US Embassy, and the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly presented a united front. These actions support US Government policy to help build Iraqi popular support for internal security measures to attain a secure environment, and foster robust economic reconstruction efforts. This should eventually lead to Iraqi self-reliance in the form of a permanent Iraqi national government, to support

and defend its people, and become a valued member and contributor to the region and larger international community. Notably, the success of the MNF-I and US Embassy Baghdad collaborative effort resulted absent any continuing communication guidance from the National Security Council. This raises the question as to what “level” of involvement the Interagency must have to preclude disconnects in US Combatant Commands’ communication activities, and overarching Interagency communication goals.

The Planning Process

Synchronizing efforts is critical to Strategic Communication activities, but control of organizations and situations requires a repeatable planning process which provides a standardized but flexible template for dealing with SC issues. The planning process defines responsibilities for the various components—Public Affairs; Public Diplomacy through the Political Advisor; J39 Information Operations Division; J5 Plans Directorate; and the supporting J2 Intelligence Directorate—so each component understands their responsibilities and how each can best bring their unique experience and insights into the overall planning effort.

This process must include the capabilities and resources each component brings to the particular tasking, and mechanisms such as a Strategic Communication annex, plus a timeline matrix for action. The synchronization of the US Government guidance with IO and SC at the Combatant Commands will ensure the respective Information Operation/ Strategic Communication planners understand the broader national-level policy guidance, and potential impacts and unintended consequences of their communications messages. The US Pacific Command’s PACOM Influence Working Group (PIWG) is a prime example of the aforementioned process. As a part of USPACOM’s response to the Asian Tsunami in December 2004, the PIWG and its pre-established planning process enabled much of the successes of OPERATION UNIFIED ASSISTANCE. The US PACOM J39, under Colonel Rob Preissinger, USAF, brought together a group of regional and cultural experts from the J5 directorate, along with Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy representatives, and Joint Information Operations Center personnel to work PIWG issues. The PIWG developed themes and messages - including those to avoid - regarding the safe deliverance of humanitarian aid and disaster relief supplies to displaced

peoples throughout Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. These safety-related messages were disseminated primarily by leaflets, broadcasts and loudspeakers to the affected populaces. Such Strategic Communication activities helped convey US intent to assist the regional governments, and ensure the safety of the various international military personnel, numerous Non-Governmental Organizations representatives, and local populaces during the relief operations.

Control and Execution

Perhaps the most critical of the seven operating principles that enable Strategic Communication at the COCOMs will be the need for centralized control and decentralized execution. Based on a common understanding of the mission-type execution orders among the Interagency; decentralized execution is necessary due to several factors. First, forward-based Information Operations and Strategic Communication personnel must vet potential messages with local, regional and cultural experts to ensure the messages convey the desired themes to have the desired outcomes. Second, personnel in the field need the authority to rapidly adjust messages based on feedback from the target audience in an OODA-loop (Observe, Orient,

MNF-I/Embassy Media Engagement

Lynch: “We’re not seeing civil war igniting in Iraq.... We’re seeing a competent, capable Iraqi government using their capable Iraqi security force to calm the storm ...”
(FOX News, ABC affiliate)



MG Lynch during MNF-I press conference (ABC affiliate)

Media Assessment: The joint Embassy/MNF-I statement condemning the shrine attack was extensively incorporated into media coverage. While MNF-I/Embassy officials have taken a background role to the Iraqi government, outlets continue to explore how current tensions will affect Colition efforts in Iraq. As outlets seek fresh angles, outside commentators may be drawn in to fill messaging gaps.

Decide, Act) type responsive process. Furthermore, the need for decentralized execution is further necessitated by the fact that this feedback loop may often extend to the tactical level, and include non-US Government entities such as Non-Governmental Organizations and Private Volunteer Organizations. Use of a centralized review and approval process loses timeliness, and hence effectiveness. Given the dynamic nature of Strategic Communication, the US Government cannot afford to have this occur during the early critical phases of an OPLAN execution or in Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)-related operations. Time is a critical factor in persuading and lead-turning target audiences in this era of global, continuous communications. Finally, the process of receiving mission-type execution orders is not always a one-way, top-down directed effort; in many cases the on-scene commander will forward target set recommendations based on real-time observations at the tactical level for adjudication at higher headquarters. Ultimately, the US Government must posture itself to leverage disparate organizations and people involved in the Strategic Communication effort - including execution authority - at any level, whenever required.

Enabling Mission-type Themes

In the end, the real Strategic Communication effort is all about executing the messages in the field, bound together by overall mission-type themes, to attain a specific policy or objective. There must be standing, pre-approved authorities prior to the execution phase to define for Information Operations/Strategic Communication planners the latitude to generate and disseminate applicable messages to support overall themes. One particular contingency plan for the GWOT provides us with an example of a significantly shortened approval process, because it leverages extensive prior Interagency coordination to facilitate senior decision-maker involvement



Staying “on message” (DefenseLink)

during the contingency plan’s execution phase. Information Operations/ Strategic Communication planners will use a matrix of situation-to-country/region with associated responsibilities and authorities for a number of anticipated situations and scenarios. This is how we could potentially stay ahead of an adversary, by providing IO/SC planners the ability to rapidly adjust to changing communication scenarios without the need to vet new courses of action through a lengthy, top-down directive coordination and adjudication process. This template could also enhance deliberate and crisis planning and execution activities for other Information Operations and Strategic Communication scenarios.

ANALYTICAL PROCESSING

The need for Interagency involvement and synchronization of actions is vital to the success of the US Government’s Strategic Communication efforts. However, this process requires clearly quantified communication actions, and measures of effectiveness in articulating government policies and goals, to remain viable.

Strategic Communication Analysis

The real measure of Strategic Communication success is target audience response and advancement of US Government goals. To this end, Combatant Commanders require tailored and coordinated SC information analysis.

This should be obtained from the widest possible array of entities, including: intelligence operations commands and centers; media consultants; US Army Psychological Operations (PSYOP) elements; the US Special Operations Command’s Joint PSYOP Support Element; and the Joint Information Operations Center. Other information centers, such as the Asia-Pacific Center in Honolulu, must be connected, and should work with national-level information agencies to do the holistic analysis required of this complex problem set. All of the activities must fully share their analysis up and down the chain. All Strategic Communication entities must understand whether we are achieving our objectives, and where we must adjust overarching themes and their associated messages. An excellent example of a thoroughly vetted Combatant Command analysis process resides in US European Command’s Strategic Effects and Communication Council (SECC). USEUCOM’s IO Chief (J39) uses the SECC to propose guidance and attain decisions on how to orchestrate and synchronize strategic objectives with theater Influence Activities and Operations. This process provides a detailed strategy-to-task linkage to help define and valid strategic effects and activities as it relates to the Command’s Theater Security Cooperation and Counterterrorism objectives, which are designed to support both the Combatant Commander’s priorities, and the overarching national security strategy. The SECC meets on a bi-monthly basis to

review theater guidance, intended effects, Priority Intelligence Requirements, and Measures of Effectiveness as part of its ongoing information analysis. Additionally, the council regularly coordinates Strategic Communication activities with the Interagency, primarily the Department of State. The SECC process leverages its superb regional and cultural expertise resident in their J8 and with other in-theater analysis sources, to accurately determine and measure the effectiveness of its Strategic Communication actions, and decide what adjustments are required to optimize the desired strategic effects.

To date, the two most notable Strategic Communication approaches taken by the Combatant Commands have either focused on a few specific target countries (e.g., US Central Command's focus on Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM), or centered on a particular humanitarian aid/disaster relief event (e.g., US Pacific Command's Operation UNIFIED ASSISTANCE). These efforts clearly show the versatility of

the Strategic Communication process to adapt to a specific situation or country focus, but perhaps a more theater-wide effort like that currently used by US European Command is warranted. The SECC approach certainly merits further examination and consideration by the other Combatant Commands and the Interagency, as a possible template for building a theater-wide - possibly US Government-wide - Strategic Communication planning processes.

CONCLUSION

The need for an effective, coherent, and responsive approach to Strategic Communication cannot be overstated. Assistant Secretary of State John Hillen recently highlighted the compression of the political-military domains by noting, "We now operate in a very different kind of strategic environment, one which requires different organizations and different rules than those by which we now play." The seven operating principles in this article suggest a viable framework for Combatant Commanders, a rough set of "rules" to enable them

to execute and succeed in effective Strategic Communication. While most of the geographic combatant commands are already addressing this complex and emergent process, they often comment that the national-level must generate more coordinated guidance, and the Interagency must speak with one synchronized voice. USSTRATCOM must be a strong advocate for the five geographic combatant commands and, when appropriate, to assist in the synchronization of themes and messages throughout the joint operational community. The Global War on Terrorism requires a concerted and synchronized effort from all of those involved in its execution, which necessitates coordinated Strategic Communication actions—from the President to the joint warriors on the Strategic Communication front-lines. Maximizing the US Government's collective voice and the use of precious Strategic Communication resources will allow it to meet the challenges of a dynamic and often anti-American information environment. 

