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FELLOWSHIP MONOGRAPH

Magnus Johnsson has a background as a military officer in the Swedish amphibious corps, as a civilian contractor in the defence industry, and as a civilian officer in the Swedish Armed Forces' Strategic Intelligence Directorate and Computer Network Operations Unit.

He holds a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in Political Science from Uppsala University, where he is currently enrolled as a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science. His dissertation project focuses on the political aspects of soldiering in contemporary military interventions. He is employed at the Department of Security and Strategy of the Swedish National Defence College, in Stockholm.

Magnus Johnsson was a Research Fellow at the NATO Defense College Research Division from April through July 2011.

NATO and the Challenge
of Strategic Communication

Magnus JOHNSSON

NATO AND THE CHALLENGE
OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE

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"We've come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect"
"We need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and much more about what our actions communicate"

- Admiral Mike Mullen[1]

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[1] Mullen, Michael G., "From the Chairman – Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics", Washington D.C., Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2009, available at http://www.jcs.mil/newsarticle.aspx?ID=142

INTRODUCTION

The concept of strategic communication, sometimes called StratCom or SC, is currently enjoying great attention, both within the Alliance and beyond. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the concept thrives at the core of strategic thinking and is widely regarded as a crucial component in successful counterinsurgency warfare, as well as a key to winning the proclaimed War of Ideas.

However, the term suffers from severe definitional confusion and its underpinning tenets are seldom discussed. As is often the case with strategic buzz words, a number of supposedly unquestionable truths are in place and, instead of discussing the ontological - and, indeed, *logical* - foundations of the concept, numerous definitions are simply left to float around together with convenient formulations pertaining to related organizational and technological requirements. In other words, solutions have discursive precedence over problems.

This paper argues that such an attitude is a source of difficulty, since it entails the risk of obscuring issues of organizational communication that are potentially crucial to conflict management and contemporary warfare. In such a perspective, the purpose of the present paper is twofold. The first objective is to highlight the conceptual disorder by analyzing the different meanings given to the term "strategic communication" and focusing closely on the widely accepted logical assumptions of strategic communication thinking. The second objective is to suggest a way to move beyond the current state of affairs, towards a process of conceptual development that actually addresses the issues of how an organization like NATO communicates in conflict and war.

The paper is organized as follows. First, a tentative explanation of why strategic communication has become such a keenly debated topic is offered. This is followed by a discussion of the problems in contemporary approaches to the concept of strategic communication. The paper then attempts to explain what strategic communication is, by identifying a number of salient conceptualizations which emerge from sectorial discourse. Next,

the underlying bases of these conceptualizations are examined in relation to competing perspectives on organizational communication. Finally, the paper proposes a practical view of how to break out from the current state of definitional paralysis and enter a process of structured conceptual development.

Chapter one

THE EMERGENCE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Why has strategic communication become such a keenly debated issue? Its current prominence can be understood by placing it in the context of two separate and sequential developments of the last two decades.

1.1   Transformation in the information age

The first development is what could be called the *Era of Transformation*, during the 1990s. Almost as a natural consequence of the end of the Cold War, this was a time when military leaders and thinkers where forced to re-evaluate the purpose and composition of military forces. Throughout the Western world, the focus shifted from mass to agility, and *transformation* of military forces became a major priority. In this context, the parallel *information revolution* promised technological solutions to some of the emerging challenges, the rationale being that mass could be substituted with information dominance. In this new and almost post-modern world, networks and information were going to make every soldier a sensor and push "power to the edge". Warfare in the information age – or *network-centric warfare* – required rapid adaptation of military forces, which resulted in extensive commitment to engineering and development.

The presumptuous prophecies of network centricity did not fully materialize, though. They were largely based on the business sector, whereas the military sector had different requirements in terms of mobility, security and robustness. In addition, implementers often made the classic mistake of concentrating on technological solutions rather than information content and the military *business*[2]. Nevertheless, even if the ideal networked force never became a reality, the enormous effort that was put into these programs

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[2] To be fair, some distinct domains of military activity have benefited and improved from the efforts during the 1990s - for instance, target acquisition. However, many of the systems developed drew from previous technological advances.

resulted in a world where communication technology, and to some extent communication itself, became not only a natural feature of warfare but actually *central* to it. As a result, it is now a commonly held belief that the "global information environment" has changed and that the changes concerned require constant adaptation[3].

1.2   The War of Ideas

Part of the information revolution euphoria was abruptly halted on 11th September 2001, effectively pushing military thinkers into a whole new setting. In his 20th September 2001 address to a joint session of Congress, the U.S. President said: "Americans are asking - Why do they hate us?".

This question can be seen as marking the beginning of the second development, a new era in which communication is still central, but no longer in the same way as during the era of transformation. We can call this the era of the *War of Ideas[4]*.

One line of reasoning implicit in the President's question was that the U.S. is not an evil country as her antagonists claim, and that those who think so *misunderstand* the U.S. This is because the correct image of the U.S. is not conveyed effectively enough, which means that by crafting the *right* message about the true nature of the U.S. and conveying it *correctly*, the hatred can be eliminated and the security of America can be promoted. Hence, in this War of Ideas, the *Battle of Narratives* has become pivotal. The anti-U.S. and anti-Western forces that seek to convey a false narrative about the U.S. and the West are formidable adversaries when it comes to communication and, in the new "global information environment" of the 21st century, one needs to be able to out-communicate the opponent. This tenet rests solidly on Richard

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[3] See, for example, the *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Strategic Communication (SC) Execution Roadmap*, Washington, DC, Department of Defense.

[4] The War of Ideas is popularly understood as a conflict between the West and the Muslim world. However, some scholars define it as a conflict between secular and religious ideas about how to organize political life, a conflict notably present *within* the Muslim world. See, for instance, Phares, Walid, 2008, *The War of Ideas. Jihadism and Democracy,* New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Holbrooke's much quoted formulation shortly after 9/11:

How could a mass murderer who publicly praised the terrorists of Sept. 11 be winning the hearts and minds of anyone? How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world's leading communications society?[5]

Furthermore, at the beginning of the media-dominated 21st century, where military success and failure at the tactical level can be observed on HDTV by voters and tax payers in their own living rooms, liberal democracies are challenged to affirm their legitimacy in an unprecedented way. Though public opinion may have been affected by media accounts as early as the war in Vietnam, or indeed World War II for that matter, the immediacy of news and gossip in today's global information environment makes it extremely hard for policy makers and commanders to stay ahead in the information game. This forces them to revise the way they communicate with their constituencies and home audiences.

1.3   Enter StratCom

In this setting, with a new global communications environment and an ongoing war of ideas and narratives, the concept of *strategic communication* enters on the scene. Or, as the pre-doctrinal JFCOM Strategic Communication Handbook puts it: "To address these challenges through unified action, a whole-of-government approach known as strategic communication (SC) has emerged"[6]. And it does not take long before the *lack of* strategic communication is regarded as a key explanation of the new terrorist threat[7].

Strategic communication and related concepts such as public diplomacy and nation branding have subsequently remained in the limelight. The discussion now is concerned with why so little has been accomplished

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[5] Holbrooke, Richard. 2001. "Get the message out", *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2001.
[6] U.S. Joint Forces Command 2010. *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy*, p. xi.
[7] In addition to the numerous op-eds and articles from the fall of 2001, an authoritative source in this regard is the 9/11 Commission Report.

in a decade, something that is seen as "shocking" since there is a growing concern that the War of Ideas is being lost[8].

In the next section, I will discuss how the concept of strategic communication has been addressed in practice and how this has contributed to the perceived failure in its implementation.

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[8] Darley, William M. "The Missing Component of U.S. Strategic Communications", *Joint Forces Quarterly*.

Chapter two

THE PROBLEMS OF STARTING WITH A WORD

Strategic communication has put the phenomenon of *communication* on the security policy agenda in a way not seen before. That this concept, which from a social science perspective is crucial for understanding how organizations work and interact, has been brought out of the dark chambers of *information operations* and *psychological operations* is laudable. And organizational activities that are designed to influence and persuade others in complicated and serious contexts such as crisis and war rightly deserve to be dealt with in conjunction with all other activities that are designed to achieve an organization's or a country's strategic goals.

However, this rethinking of the politico-military business is complicated, and the way that it is presently done entails certain problems.

One is the definitional chaos that has occurred, fueled by many eager attempts to fill the catch phrase with meaning. This has actually created a situation where the term is no longer very useful, since it can mean whatever one wishes or chooses. This has prompted the US Joint Forces Command to suggest no longer using the term and opting for the supposedly more tangible *communication strategy*[9]. To carry the matter to its extreme conclusion, one could even contemplate simply dropping the term. This might at least make it possible to break out from the present definitional obsession.

Another problem is that the authoritative way in which definitions are propagated – through doctrine – to a certain extent suppresses intellectual reasoning and discussion on the more theoretical content of strategic communication. Other contended terms suffer from the same treatment:

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[9] U.S. JFCOM *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy*, 2010.

Trying to place a commonly accepted meaning on words is important for the obvious reason of establishing understanding. On the other hand, attempts to construct immutable definitions can place boundaries around commonsense and entrench inflexible thinking, which in turn can inhibit progress[10].

This trend is supported by pretentious statements such as the following:

Strategic communication **must** *be at the heart of U.S. Government efforts....[11]* (my emphasis)

or:

Strategic Communications **are** *an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives.[12]* (my emphasis)

In conjunction with definitions provided by the government or the armed forces, such statements leave little room for questioning *why* strategic communication is important or *how* it is supposed to so significantly contribute to success. But such understanding does not seem to be required, since the significance of strategic communication is already established. This attitude is well illustrated by a quotation, attributed to Admiral Ernest King during World War II, in an influential article of 2007 by the then COM SOUTHCOM Admiral Stavridis, now NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe:
I don't know what the hell this [strategic communication] is that Marshall is always talking about, but I want some of it.[13]

And this widespread attitude among military commanders leads to the next problem.

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[10] Stephens, Alan, and Nicola Baker, *Making Sense of War: Strategy for the 21st Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 4-5.
[11] U.S. JFCOM Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy, 2010.
[12] NATO STRATCOM Policy PO(2009)0141, 29 September 2009.
[13] Stavridis. James G. 2007, "Strategic Communication and National Security", Joint Forces Quarterly 46 (3rd quarter), pp. 4-7.

Despite the implicit uncertainty of what strategic communication is, implementing it is given major priority, since it is believed to be so crucial in today's conflicts. In the proclaimed and ongoing *War of Ideas* the capacity for strategic communication needs to be better than that of the enemy, and therefore it needs to be implemented quickly so as not to lose the initiative.

The U.S. Department of Defense *Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap* of 2006 is an example of how implementation is being deliberately accelerated. Among other things, the document tasks the organization to implement a process, to define organizational roles and relations, to develop a doctrine, and to allocate resources in order to "organize, train and equip DoD's primary communication supporting capabilities, all with an '*aggressive timeline*' ". With such top-down pressure, supported in budget, the loyal workers within the tasked organizations have little incentive to question the logical foundations of strategic communication as a concept. Instead, naturally, they hurriedly suggest what strategic communication could mean and what it could be, as well as tangible solutions for its implementation.

There are two very distinct expressions of this approach. One is the constant *defining* that military and government agencies seem to be obliged to conduct. However, from a research perspective many of these definitions do not qualify as such since they fail to meet rather basic requirements of definitions such as logical coherence, mutual exclusiveness and collective exhaustiveness[14]. The other distinct expression is the tendency to define strategic communication simply by co-opting already existing subdisciplines such as EW, PA, PSYOPS, and CNO[15]. This may be very convenient, but it bypasses the problem of thinking about conceptual matters. Furthermore, it equates strategic communication to *information operations*[16] according to some definitions of the latter, which raises the suspicion that strategic communication is just old wine in a new bottle. In this way, by implementing some new solutions and inheriting others, strategic communication becomes

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[14] Also known as the MECE principle, which basically stipulates that there should be no overlap or gaps between the parts of a defined whole.

[15] Electronic warfare, public affairs, psychological operations, and computer network operations.

[16] The concept of information operations has been treated in a very similar fashion to that of strategic communication.

self-fulfilling.

The bottom line here is that strategic communication discourse is self-referential; it clings to a term and tries to fill it with meaning so that the appropriate steps and measures can be taken in order to be able to declare mission accomplished. But the term itself is never called into question. To claim that something unknown is urgently needed and essential is not a sound way to conduct concept development, marred as it is by an inherent risk of failing to perceive something highly important. Suppose that, for example, there is some research on organizational communication that could actually be highly relevant to how NATO and its member states fight wars. The way we think and talk about strategic communication today prevents such insight coming to the fore. This could possibly explain the apparent strategic failures in some current conflicts, but it also suggests that we need to reposition ourselves in relation both to the concept as such and to the way in which we adapt to the "new communications environment".

Chapter three

WHAT IS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

Strangely enough, this is a valid question. To be sure, there is no shortage of definitions, but they are often divergent and contradictory or merely copies of earlier definitions. I will not attempt to define strategic communication in this paper, since that would simply perpetuate the very practice I am opposed to – i.e., giving disproportionate attention to initial consolidation of a word or phrase. Instead, I will analyze how we talk about strategic communication in order to reveal what meanings the concept carries in our discourse.

In this section I discuss a few conceptualizations that can be identified in military strategic communication discourse. These conceptualizations are derived not only from official definitions and doctrinal explanations, but also from examining how staffs are organized or how sectorial discourse relates to similar topics such as public diplomacy and corporate crisis management.

3.1 Five ways to understand strategic communication

From strategic communication discourse, at least five different ways to understand strategic communication can be identified:

- as the orchestration of words and deeds
- as a way to explain action
- as a way to convey an image
- as a strategic tool
- as a branch of planning and operations.

These can be considered as ideal types, which implies that there might be additional variants and also different combinations of them.

3.1.1 Strategic communication is the orchestration of words and deeds

In this conceptualization, strategic communication is understood as an organization's or a society's conscious and deliberate attempts to harmonize the way it communicates[17]. Using the human individual as a metaphor, this would equal the individual's attempts to be consistent in what s/he says and does. And this must be the dream of military commanders, political leaders and business executives alike – to have a group of people (the organization) doing and saying things in synchronic harmony according to the executive vision.

A government example of this conceptualization is President George W. Bush's Executive Order 13283 of 2003, which created a *White House Global Communications Office*. Its mission was to advise the President and other parts of the government on how to "ensure consistency in messages". In the military realm, the "theory of strategic communication" which is presented in the U.S. Department of Defense *Commander's Handbook for SC and Communication Strategy* offers a striking and attractive example of this. This "theory" compares strategic communication to the activity of an orchestra[18]. The metaphor of a conductor, directing the musicians according to a score to produce harmonious music, suggests that in a military or government organization the commander/leader can direct his subordinate units according to a plan to produce harmonious communication.

The idea of orchestration relates to the belief that "every action, word, and image sends a message, and every team member is a messenger, from the 18-year-old rifleman to the commander"[19]. This perspective on the communication of organizations is important, and with military logic the consequence is that the messengers need to be controlled.

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[17] Murphy, Dennis, "Crisis Comm., Strategic Communication and…BP", *DIME Blog,* US Army War College, 2010, http://www.carlisle.army.mil/dime/blog/article.cfm?blog=dime&article=112
[18] The graph is available in the U.S. DoD *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy*, p. 11-4, at http://www.carlisle.army.mil/DIME/documents/Strategic%20Communication%20Handbook%20JFC%2009.pdf
[19] DoD 2008, *Principles of Strategic Commmunication*.

In doctrine, this conceptualization is often expressed as "the orchestration and/or synchronization of actions, images and words to achieve a desired effect"[20]. In such a general perspective, one can ask what separates strategic communication from strategy itself, and indeed if there is a conceptual difference at all. I will elaborate on this after I have discussed alternative ways of looking at the communication effects of organizational behavior and the communication of organizations.

3.1.2 Strategic communication is a way to explain action

In this conceptualization, communication activities parallel action in order to contribute to the understanding of that action. To put it differently, words are used to convey the "true" meaning of actions. This is very common in both government and business, and is often called *public affairs*, an activity in which a dedicated unit of the organization releases information about the organization's activities in order to promote success. For instance, this is how NATO ACO looks at its public affairs mission[21]. In the article by Admiral Stavridis quoted above, he explicitly calls this activity strategic communication. At SOUTHCOM, strategic communication was used to "provide truthful information" about decisions and actions[22].

Explaining organizational behavior often becomes critical in times of crisis. A recent high profile example is British Petroleum's public affairs failure with regard to the oil leak in the Mexican Gulf in 2010. Besides being a disaster for people and wildlife in the affected region, the oil spill was also a disaster for BP. But in contrast to the emergency in Orange County, California in 1990, when thousands of gallons of BP oil spilled into the Pacific, the way BP top management communicated externally through the press in 2010 is said to have added significantly to the company's problems. BP's attempts to downplay the extent of the leak and its consequences totally failed to correlate with the images of a gushing oil plume on the bottom of the Mexican Gulf or the oil-drenched birds that were dying on the Gulf shoreline. The difference between the two cases is that in 1990 BP did right

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[20] *Ibid.*
[21] NATO ACO, *Public Affairs Handbook 2010*, p.1.
[22] Stavridis 2007.

and explained the incident well, while in 2010 it did wrong and worsened the situation with badly chosen statements[23]. Admittedly, it is questionable whether BP could have compensated for bad performance with "good" PR. As one crisis management expert puts it: "Crisis management is about fixing the problem. It's not about looking good"[24].

A different example of trying to explain action is the White House's press room activity after the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. Shortly after the raid, President Obama announced that bin Laden was dead and offered some brief, sketchy details of the operation. Later, under the pressure of an extremely curious press corps, various White House spokespersons added bits of information to the narrative already created around the raid. This not only failed to satisfy the press corps, it also added to the confusion regarding what had actually taken place in the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Issues like the breach of Pakistani sovereignty, the question of whether Seal Team 6 really tried to apprehend bin Laden or if they were ordered to kill him, the legality of the killing, the appropriateness of burying the body at sea, and the vacillation over the release of photographic evidence all emerged as a result of follow-up questions to the White House's attempts to explain the operation.

A relevant concept when discussing this type of strategic communication is *framing*. When events occur, people try to understand them and make sense of them by using their own beliefs and previous experiences, sometimes called *filters* or *schemas*. This makes it hard for strategic communicators to influence how people should understand events. A striking example of when strategic communicators were actually able to do this can be seen in the 9/11 attacks. The shock of the American population can partially be explained by the lack of an appropriate schema enabling most people to make sense of the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Not since Pearl Harbor had the U.S. been directly attacked

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[23] Levick, Richard S., "BP's Orange County Spill Response", Washington DC, Levick Strategic Communications, 2010. Available at http://www.levick.com/resources/topics/articles/public_crisis_management.php

[24] *Ibid.*; see also McClam, Erin and Harry R. Weber, "BP's failures made worse by PR mistakes", MSNBC.com, June 11, 2010.

from the outside. In this vacuum President Bush managed, through a series of speeches and actions, to create a narrative that helped make sense of the attacks. In this perspective, what America represented – a free, democratic and multifaceted society – was not tolerated by the extremists who wanted to destroy it.

When such a narrative is already in place, invoking it can help communicators to frame events rather quickly. On 12 December 2010, a man blew himself to death on a deserted back street in central Stockholm, not far from the busy shopping streets. His intention may well have been to conduct a suicide attack against Christmas shoppers, but all evidence indicates that he accidentally detonated his charges prematurely, killing himself, lightly wounding two bystanders, and causing some minor material damage. What was apparently a grave mistake during the preparation of a suicide attack was quickly framed, by the security service and media, to present a narrative of a completed terrorist attack. Swedish analysts and commentators had been speculating about terrorist attacks in Sweden for the past nine years and, when this event occurred, few other explanations where possible. Likewise, Islamic terrorism was the dominant frame for explaining the bombing and mass murder in Oslo in July 2011 – an explanation that soon proved to be terribly wrong.

The post-9/11 narrative also made America's response obvious: to defend the country, its values and the American way of life, the extremists had to be defeated. This narrative worked well in the U.S. and the rest of the Western world, but not everywhere else. As Richard Holbrooke pointed out, Muslims around the world did not understand the events in the same way: "defining what this war is really about in the minds of the 1 billion Muslims in the world will be of decisive and historic importance"[25]. Implicit in this observation is the concept that understanding and meaning are not solely determined by what message is conveyed, making the idea that actions can be explained at all somewhat problematic. This will be further discussed in the next section.

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[25] Holbrooke 2001.

3.1.3 Strategic communication is to convey an image

Strategic communication is often thought to be about conveying an objective image of a country or an organization, and this idea was prominent in the behavior of the U.S. administration in the wake of 9/11. The operative belief is that if foreign audiences are presented with a true and undistorted image of you, they will understand and accept you and your actions. This was one of the main ideas behind the establishment of the White House Office of Global Communications[26], and it is a component of NATO ACO's *Strategic Focus*:

We must help people understand what we are about and where we are going. It cuts across everything we do. Internally everyone needs to understand our mission, values and vision, while externally we need the support of the public and those we operate with and amongst[27].

This conception of strategic communication resembles branding and brand management. Through strategic communication in the form of advertising and other related activities the brand, or the perceived image of the company, is shaped. In the business sector, brand management also involves defining what the company is about, what values it stands for and what strategy it has.

Naturally, this can hardly be done in the same way in the case of a country. A country's values may not be exactly what the political elite wishes, but rather the aggregate of the values of the whole population. Accounts of national values that are not consistent with such an aggregate may do more harm than good, as in the case BP's euphemistic depictions of the oil leak in the Mexican Gulf. Also, if a domestic population's views of its values differ substantially from the views of foreign audiences, "nation branding" may be counterproductive.

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[26] Executive Order 13283 of January 21, 2003.
[27] NATO ACO, *Public Affairs Handbook 2010*, p.3.

3.1.4 Strategic communication is a weapon

In this conceptualization strategic communication is regarded as a resource, a strategic tool, or even a weapon.

In politics and government strategic communication is often talked about as one aspect of national power[28], something that is salient after 9/11 but which was also an important idea during World War II and the Cold War. In this context strategic communication is sometimes referred to in terms of *soft power*, but the common emphasis on the coercive qualities of communication actually contradicts the definition of soft power[29].

This view of strategic communication comes close to the traditional activities of public relations (PR), public affairs (PA) and public diplomacy (PD), and these terms are often used as synonyms of strategic communication. Many countries today have a dedicated organization or a government department that is tasked with shaping the country's image abroad in order to further its national interests. This is done by directing influence campaigns towards foreign audiences, typically foreign populations but also foreign governments, even though this is still considered the task of traditional diplomacy.

PR and PA are often considered to pertain to the domestic audience, and the political sensitivity of trying to "persuade" one's own population has resulted in a strict demarcation between communications activities directed towards domestic as opposed to foreign audiences, a demarcation that is unrealistic in the new communications environment and counterproductive to the idea of harmonizing communications.

The idea of communication as a weapon is common within the military realm, both in doctrine and also at the so-called lower levels of warfare, i.e. at the operational and tactical levels. One example is the

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[28] DOD DSB 2008 report on strategic communication.
[29] Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, which is said to have had significant influence on American foreign policy during the nineties, stresses the power of *attraction* rather than the power of coercion, regardless of whether words or deeds constitute foreign policy behavior.

strategic communication of NATO's force in Afghanistan – ISAF. Here, the term suggests that the ability to communicate effectively and purposefully is of strategic importance to force commanders. At this level, strategic communication resembles a weapon system that is used in coordination with other weapon systems. Surgical messages are compared to surgical strikes: in order to achieve effects, the right messages have to be crafted and then delivered through the right channel. This view has prompted some writers to claim that strategic *messaging* is perhaps a better term than strategic communication[30].

3.1.5 Strategic communication is a staff branch

The last conceptualization of strategic communication is as an organizational function or a staff branch. This view is fully consistent with military organizational thinking and bureaucratic culture, and makes the handling of this new concept rather unproblematic. By treating strategic communication similarly to, for example intelligence, operational planning or targeting, its implementation becomes rather straightforward. All one has to do is to design strategic communication on those models, i.e. to develop some doctrinal foundation, create individual roles and organizational units, design technology and training, and so on.

Many military documents express this conceptualization. A prominent example is the DoD's *Quadrennial Defense Review Strategic Communications Execution Road Map* from 2006. This document concludes that:

The U.S. military is not sufficiently organized, trained, or equipped to analyze, plan, coordinate and integrate the full spectrum of capabilities available to promote America's interest[31].

This factual statement leaves little room for speculation. Not only are the necessary "capabilities" already "available", but all that needs to be

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[30] Adam, Gordon and Emrys Schoemaker, "The art of conversation", *The RUSI Journal* 155(4), 2010, pp. 52-57.
[31] DoD QDR SC Execution Road Map, September 25, 2006, p.2.

done is to organize, train and equip the organization so that it can "analyze, plan, coordinate and integrate" these capabilities. Hence, setting up strategic communication is no more complicated than setting up an intelligence system.

An almost extreme expression of this bureaucratic culture, briefly mentioned at the beginning of the present paper, is to accomplish strategic communication by organizational restructuring. NATO ACO's approach is to bundle existing "traditional communications functions" – public diplomacy (PD), public affairs (PA), information operations[32] (InfoOps), and psychological operations (PsyOps) – under the strategic communication umbrella. In NATO ACO, strategic communication is to coordinate all these traditional functions with each other, but also with *other* "critical operational non-kinetic and kinetic elements"[33].

This last idea leads to questions about how strategic communication as an activity is supposed to relate to regular operational coordination. The essence of military planning and execution, and the core business of staffs and commanders, is to coordinate activities and resources to achieve goals. To add a new function that is supposed to do the same thing but with a slightly different perspective is bound to be problematic, and the failure to explain how this is supposed to work out may well be the root of the confusion that military organizations experience in this area[34].

To complicate things further, the structure of NATO ACO's handbook implicitly places strategic communication under the concept of *public affairs*. The foreword states that "it is a 'hands-on' publication for ACO Public Affairs practitioners on how to conduct the public affairs functions of media relations, internal communications, and community communications, focused on deployed operations." This organizational approach is highlighted by a

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[32] Which in many military doctrines include electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO) and PsyOps.
[33] Annex F to NATO's *Public Affairs Handbook 2010.*
[34] Explained as "culture shock" in Techau, Jan, "What Makes Communication Strategic? – Preparing Military Organizations for the Battle of Ideas"*,* Research Paper No. 65, February 2011, NATO Defense College Research Division, Rome.

warning that: "Often, without proper understanding of NATO policy and the sensitivities of nations, and in a perceived attempt to streamline process and develop staff hierarchy, commanders and influencers within the command group will attempt to subordinate Public Affairs to Information Operations or Strategic Communication"[35]. In addition, the following paragraph of the document points out that "military public affairs in NATO will not supersede the civilian public diplomacy leadership of the Alliance", thereby introducing yet another concept (PD) into the hierarchy of terms. These examples, all from the same document, illustrate the constant rearrangement of words that not only creates confusion but also diverts attention from important conceptual matters.

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[35] NATO ACO *Public Affairs handbook 2010*, p. 5.

Chapter four

DOMINANT AND CHALLENGING VIEWS
ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The discussion above has alluded to a number of underlying ontological propositions, i.e. propositions about how the world is made up and causal assumptions about these real-world phenomena – for example, the prospects of persuasion and the objectivity of meaning. What unites many of these assumptions is that they illustrate a striking *positivism*, i.e. they are impregnated with a belief that organizational behavior and organizational communication, indeed social life itself, can be planned and controlled and that the effects can be measured. This view is clearly visible in the U.S. DoD 2007 *Strategic Communication Plan for Afghanistan*[36]. In a matrix, the *desired effects* are defined, for instance that the Taliban shall be perceived as drug criminals who violate the Quran and "exploit poor Afghan farmers". The matrix then breaks this down into contributory actions, proposing methods such as "support traditional communication" and assigning specific tasks to the actors concerned. Measures of effectiveness are also declared. In this way strategic communication is laid out in a fairly straightforward plan that just needs to be executed. Naturally, planning is essential in complex military operations, but the belief that such a complex and *human* thing as Afghan attitudes can be tweaked by fine-tuning a plan is naïve.

The opposite of this stance is a more relativistic one, which questions whether social life can be neatly depicted and deterministically shaped. This has particular relevance to the concept of meaning; whereas positivism can regard meaning as something absolute, objective and determinable, relativism claims that meaning cannot be understood without regard to context and that it is never absolute or universal. Naturally, we cannot give up setting goals and planning execution, but we can adopt a more sober view of the complexity and unpredictability of human communication.

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[36] Available at http://mountainrunner.us/files/pubd/dod_afghan_sc_plan.pdf

The other feature that unites these propositions is the importance they give to a rather obsolete model of communication – the *transmission model*, usually credited to Shannon & Weaver. This looks at communication as a linear process between a source and a destination[37]. The model, developed in 1947 to facilitate the development of transmission in telephone systems, describes a number of entities and their relationships. A *source* has some information that it wants to convey for the purpose of influencing, and it does so by formulating a *message*, to be *encoded* by a *transmitter* into a *signal* which is sent through a *channel*. At the other end of the channel is a *receiver*, which *decodes* the signal into a message which is then delivered to the *destination*. Successful communication is achieved when the destination receives the same meaning as the source intended, and any failures are due to faults in the linear process, for example *noise* in the channel. Failures are therefore rectified by polishing the message, fixing faults along the line, or by *repeating* transmissions until messages are conveyed successfully.

This view of communication, which is also called the *message influence model*, has had a massive impact over the last six decades. It is deeply rooted in our way of thinking and continues to inform strategic communication theory and practice today:
The message influence model also pervades post-9/11 thinking about public diplomacy, public affairs, information operations, and media strategy in the United States government[38].

It is especially visible at the national level, as an underlying assumption in the War of Ideas era. The 9/11 Commission report argued that: "The U.S. Government must define what its message is, what it stands for […] and it must do more to communicate its message"[39] .
However, the model has failed to deliver success in the post-9/11 environment,

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[37] Limitations of the transmission model are discussed in Corman, Steven R., Angela Tre-thewey and Bud Goodall, "A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas. From Simplistic Influence to Pragmatic Complexity"*,* Consortium for Strategic Com-munication, Arizona State University, April 3, 2007; and Falkheimer, Jesper and Mats Heide, *Strategisk kommunikation.* Malmö, Studentlitteratur, 2007.
[38] Corman *et al* 2007, p. 6.
[39] Corman *et al* 2007

which some explain by its "failure to respond to the complexities of communication as a *meaning-making* process":

The message influence model assumes, incorrectly, that communication is the transfer of "meanings from person to person" and that the message sent is the one that counts. The problem is that a meaning cannot simply be transferred, like a letter mailed from point A to point B[40].

Instead, meaning is created at the listening end in a complex process including the individual invocation of personal beliefs, previous experiences and prejudices, and negotiated in a complex social interaction where factors like culture, norms and history come into play.

This view of communication is encapsulated in the *ritual model* of communication, sometimes also called the *meaning-making model*. It is not so much an alternative model as an extension to the transmission model, since it does not eradicate the concepts of sender and receiver but incorporates a more complex and *socially based* view of how meaning is made. Key words here are *interpretation*, which is what the receiver does with the message on the basis of inherent factors such as those mentioned above, and *negotiation* or *interaction*, which signifies the collaborative relationship between actors in the communication process.

This extended view of communication puts the transmission model's dominance over strategic communication thinking and practice in a precarious light. If meaning is not established on the basis of the sender's intention, or his re-crafting and re-sending of the message, but through a complex process of negotiation between the sender and the receiver, as well as *among* receivers, resultant meanings diametrically opposed to those intended might become established. In the context of strategy and warfare, counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency, this could have severe consequences.

The conclusion of this line of reasoning must be that it is necessary, if not to abandon the transmission model, at least to complement it in order to expand our understanding of how people and organizations communicate

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[40] *Ibid.*

and create meaning concerning the world around them. In the following section we will reappraise some of the underpinning logical assumptions of the strategic communication debate within this broadened perspective.

4.1 A critical reappraisal of some common assumptions in strategic communication discourse

4.1.1 Organizational communication can be orchestrated

The U.S. DoD's "theory of strategic communication" postulates that an organization's communication can be integrated, synchronized and orchestrated. To be sure, an organization can *attempt* such orchestration, but both relativism and the ritual model of communication suggest that the results will not be determined by the orchestration alone.

The idea of the *strategic corporal* correctly reminds us that, in today's media-dominated world, the words and deeds of a single soldier on the organization's edge can have strategic consequences. One way to handle this challenge is to try to strengthen control over his words and deeds. With the orchestration idea in mind, a comprehensive strategic communication plan is then required in order to orchestrate all the messengers in the field. An example of such a plan is the Department of Defense's *Strategic Communication Plan for Afghanistan*[41]. As mentioned, this declares the desired effects (including measures of effectiveness) within Afghan and other audiences, the methods and tasks that are to ensure achievement of those effects, and the actors that are to carry them out. It also determines the themes or narratives that will be the basis for message-crafting. The top-down coordination implied by this plan promises that each "messenger" will deliver the "actions, words and images" that are necessary to achieve the desired effects, i.e. influence.

Both relativism and the ritual model of communication challenge this ambitious endeavor. If meaning is established subjectively, and based more on the receiver's terms of reference than on the intentions of the sender, then the effects in the plan are not likely to materialize and the measures

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[41] Available at http://mountainrunner.us/files/pubd/dod_afghan_sc_plan.pdf

will not be valid. However, since the plan generates substantial amounts of communication activities, there will be *other* effects!

4.1.2 Strategic messages can persuade audiences

Another salient belief in the sectorial discourse is that audiences can be persuaded through strategic communication. In Richard Holbrooke's much quoted analysis just after 9/11, he states that the reason why Muslims around the world "misunderstand" the U.S. is because of failed messages and inadequate messengers[42]. In other words, and consistent with the prevailing transmission model, there is a failure to persuade Muslim audiences what the U.S. actually stands for and what the war is about because of faults in the communication line, and persuasion can therefore be achieved by addressing those problems, i.e. the message and the messengers.

The ritual model of communication challenges this idea by claiming that the "interpretation by a receiver is influenced by an array of factors that are outside the control of – and may even be unknown to – the sender"[43]. Hence, receivers *will* be influenced, but this will depend less on the quality of the messages and the messengers than on the totality of the receivers' framework of reference as well as on their deliberation and negotiation regarding the attempts to influence them.

The 2008 Danish documentary *Armadillo* shows how a group of soldiers in the Helmand province in southern Afghanistan struggle to survive their tour of duty while they also try to make sense of their mission and of the world around them. The film was met with public disgust, both in Denmark and Sweden, since the soldiers were perceived as bragging over and celebrating the killings of Afghan insurgents. But the film also shows the difficulties and almost perverse effects of trying to persuade by delivering the right message. The story is that a lieutenant is assigned to the rifle platoon as a civilian-military liaison officer. During patrols in the countryside, it is his task to tell any civilians they encounter that the ISAF is there to help

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[42] Holbrooke 2001.
[43] Corman et al., 2007, p.11.

them, that the ISAF and the civilian population need to work together to fight the terrorists, and that the civilians therefore need to give the ISAF any information that they might have. The film makes it clear that both the liaison officer himself and of course the Afghan citizens have a hard time buying this "narrative", showing not only the skepticism of the civilians but also the liaison officer's growing despair as his initial conviction wanes. What this example illustrates, irrespective of the unlikelihood of pulling off *Jedi mind tricks* outside science fiction movies, is the contrast between the message influence model and the meaning-making model: persuasion according to the message influence model does not work, and any attempt to make it do so has unintended, and possibly undesirable, effects.

Some DoD documents actually touch upon aspects of the meaning-making model of communication. In *Principles for strategic communication* (2008), the DoD acknowledges that understanding requires dialogue, which is a clear reference to the communication concepts of negotiation and collaboration. However, the implicit view in the document is that *we* need to have a dialogue with *them* so that they develop trust in us, which will lead to them understanding us. In this sense, dialogue can be seen more as a lubricant for the transmission model than a mechanism for negotiation between sender and receiver.

Examples of the meaning-making model of communication in practice are scarce. Most of them are individual initiatives at the local level, such as the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team's recent project to create mutual understanding with local power players through discussion about moderate Islam[44], and such initiatives have yet to reach policy documents, doctrines and handbooks.

4.1.3 An object can be objectively understood

The idea that the "truth" about a country, an organization or an event is objective, and can be conveyed as such to receivers, also runs into

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[44] Presentation by Major Yandura at the conference *Information Operations Europe*, London, 29th June 2011.

problems when confronted with relativism and the meaning-making model of communication.

All of us have images of things, people and events. They are only rarely the product of direct and transparent observation, but related more to sources such as media stories about the sujects concerned. In his study of public opinion Water Lippmann calls this the *pseudo-environment*[45]. It works as a virtual model of reality and is shaped by outside influences, such as media reporting, popular culture and stories told by friends, all interpreted on the basis of previous experiences and "knowledge". The pseudo-environment makes it possible for a person to have opinions about, for example, Afghanistan without ever having been there.

If the pseudo-environment is individually unique, then a country like the United States or an organization like NATO cannot be objectively understood. Any given person's – or society's – understanding of the United States will be conditioned by the personal pseudo-environment(s) determining how knowledge is assimilated. One could argue that the pseudo-environments could be investigated, perhaps through opinion polls, which would enable crafting of suitable messages; but individual experiences will likely vary to such a degree that generalizations will prove impossible. Just imagine what the experience of having been an exchange student in the United States will do to the interpretation of messages about what the U.S. is all about.

Another problem with this notion is the complexity of the "truth" about a country. First of all, it is unclear what it is about a country that we think needs to be conveyed. One suggestion is national values, but when this concept is analyzed it proves so chaotic and fragmented in the globalized world that defining a country's national values is far from simple. In concrete terms, it is unlikely that this evident chaos can actually prove useful with a view to soliciting support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq[46].

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[45] Lippmann, Walter, *Public Opinion,* Miami, BN Publishing, 2007.

[46] Darley, William M., "The Missing Component of U.S. Strategic Communications", *Joint Forces Quarterly*, issue 47, 2007, pp. 108-113.

4.1.4 Strategic communication comes from the top

The figure of the conductor in the orchestral metaphor, and indeed the very wording "strategic communication", imply an activity that emanates from the strategic level of an organization or a country. The strategic corporal syndrome contradicts this idea, but the orchestration theory attempts to deal with this problem through the mechanism of control.

However, at least according to research on organizational behavior[47], *everything* an organization does or says externally, regardless of which hierarchical level it comes from, is strategic in the sense that it communicates with the organization's environment and that it has impacts on the organization's situation in that environment.

The orchestral metaphor also suggests that what is communicated can be grounded in an image of the organization or country determined at the strategic level. As just seen, this is not very likely in the case of a country, but if every man is a strategic messenger then *some* values will inevitably be communicated. For instance, what does it mean for a non-U.S. citizen's image of the United States when the government advocates a foreign policy that is challenged by domestic popular protests? European sentiments on the 2003 invasion of Iraq were probably not only shaped by American strategic communication efforts but also by American popular reactions and domestic debate.

With this line of reasoning, one can contemplate how rural Afghans "understand" the United States – or NATO for that matter. Rural Afghanistan consists of mostly small, autonomous micro-societies, with limited access to the types of channel envisioned in the strategic communication doctrines[48]. These societies' basis of knowledge about the US and NATO, or their pseudo-environment, is most likely shaped by direct encounters with American and NATO soldiers and other Western actors such as aid and development workers. And those who have *not* had direct contact with those actors may

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[47] Abrahamsson, Bengt., and Jon Aarum Andersen, *Organisation: att beskriva och förstå organisationer*, Malmö: Liber, 2005.

[48] Nixon, Hamish, *The changing face of local governance? Community Development Councils in Afganistan.* AREU Working Paper Series, 2008, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Kabul.

well be informed by local stories of such encounters. What values do these ambassadors radiate? These are probably not equivalent to the national values that their government wishes to convey. Instead, values socialized within the U.S. Army or the U.S. Marine Corps are probably more salient in encounters with locals and, if so, will be a part of the meaning the latter attribute to the United States and NATO.

4.1.5 The Battle of Narratives is separate from the rest of warfare

The Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication says:

The battle of the narrative is a full-blown battle in the cognitive dimension of the information environment, just as traditional warfare is fought in the physical domains (air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace).

I will not go into the conceptual quagmire of the "information environment" and the "cognitive domain" (suffice it to say that they are claimed to be special domains in which warfare is waged), but what the quotation does is separate strategic communication, and all its related concepts, from the rest of warfare. Not only does this contradict the idea that strategic communication should integrate words and deeds, but it also suggests that warfare on land, at sea and in the air is not a part of any such narrative as might exist. This raises the question of whether it is possible to separate words and deeds at all. Since this is an extremely broad and complicated issue, I will limit myself here to mentioning a few thoughts that might be relevant.

Firstly, traditional military war activities, or "kinetic" activities, cannot be thought of as devoid of communicative qualities. The raid on Osama bin Laden's compound could have stood as a "message" all by itself, without the efforts of the White House Communications Department. Its meaning would have been deliberated and negotiated within various audiences at its own speed. By the same token, the 9/11 attacks were not commented on in an al-Qaeda press room, but there can hardly be a place in the world where they are devoid of meaning. Consequently, *anything* that soldiers do and that audiences observe will be interpreted to the same extent as any message

skillfully crafted by strategic communicators.

Secondly, it follows that both strategic and tactical activities viewed as traditionally military, like capturing terrain or moving troops, are not necessarily perceived as such by audiences outside the military. Clausewitz said that war is the struggle between wills[49], and troop movements and terrain capture are only means in that struggle. U.S. troop movements to the Persian Gulf have no (non-military) meaning in themselves, but in the context of a struggle of wills between the U.S. and Iraq they do. It is therefore dangerous and counterproductive to separate different aspects of warfare and political struggle into different "domains".

Though the above remarks are not intended to offer an extensive and rigorous analysis or deconstruction, the aspects of strategic communication that I have discussed in this section hopefully indicate that the conceptual stability of strategic communication is at least questionable. This is bound to have consequences, and some suggestions are in order.

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[49] Smedberg, Marco, *Militär ledning*, Lund: Historiska media, 2001.

A WAY AHEAD

The concluding section of this paper offers some advice to NATO, based on the arguments presented in the paper but also on a number of progressive writings about strategic communication. Much literature on this subject is based on the examples of nation states, especially the United States, and corporations. NATO is neither, which suggests both opportunities and challenges. I will try to incorporate them into this final section.

If we momentarily accept that we are in a locked state of definitional confusion, there are two main courses of action – either to keep going in the same direction as before, or to try again. Since the first course of action will not solve any of the problems discussed in this paper, it will not be taken into consideration here. On the other hand, the second will be discussed in some detail.

This second course of action could mean following the advice of US JFCOM, i.e. to drop the term "strategic communication" and look for an alternative. This seemingly radical move might resolve the present impasse but, if the following step is merely to adopt an alternative term like *communication strategy*, we run the risk of simply moving the problem one step sideways. However, if we can avoid this trap, such a move might allow us to focus properly on conceptual matters.

This would require a set of coordinated activities, preferably under the leadership of NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT).

Firstly, the project requires a type of kick-off, to mark the break with the current approach. One of ACT's Concept Development and Experimentation conferences could provide an opportunity for this.

Secondly, an organizational body composed of practitioners, leaders and researchers should be formed.

Thirdly, the group should be tasked with investigating three (tentative)

principal questions:

- What is the state of the art on the topic of organizational communication?
- What is the state of the art on the topic of communication in the contexts of conflict and war?
- What are the implications for an organization such as NATO?

These questions are intended to mark a move away from those currently debated, such as "What is strategic communication?"

In addressing these questions, I would advise the members of the group to consider the following proposals, based on the reasoning in this paper.

- *Let go of the idea that meaning and understanding can be conveyed.* People on the receiving end of NATO's communication will understand the Alliance subjectively, not only as a result of what messages the Alliance conveys but also on the basis of their own experiences, biases, hearsay, myths, culture and so on. The extreme complexity of this process suggests that *less is better* when it comes to strategic communication in the public diplomacy sense of the phrase. The Consortium for Strategic Communication suggests an evolutionary approach, where planned communications activities are kept short and simple and gradually evaluated and developed[50].
- *Do not expect to be able to orchestrate the organization's communication*: "You can't control the message. Get over it"[51]. If message consistency is desired, a clear idea about the organization and its business together with a sound organizational culture is required. Given the political nature of an organization like NATO, this might not be feasible, but trying to control the organization's communication from the top of the hierarchy entails the risk of creating and exposing internal schisms, making the organization look authoritarian and fragmented. It is therefore better to embrace the multifaceted character of the Alliance and accept that different parts of it will convey different and even contradictory messages, something that could be framed as demonstrating democratic

[50] Corman *et al.* 2007.
[51] *Ibid.*

values.

- *Do not separate communication from the rest.* Everything that NATO does – and has done – is potential fodder in the meaning-making processes of audiences. This includes information campaigns and press conferences, as well as operations, top-level decision making and elections of Secretaries General. To be sure, public affairs activities are a necessary part of the Alliance's business, but dedicated information activities cannot be planned and executed on the side – that in itself indicates a gap between deeds and words. The establishment of a dedicated strategic communication cell within the headquarters may thus actually work against the aim of consistency between words and deeds. With this in mind, in the future debate of what organizational communication is to NATO, the notion of considering strategic communication as merely *strategy* with an enlarged sense of how meaning is made should be considered. If so, the term "strategic communication" can be put to rest, and the concept of *strategy* in the 21st century can be the new focus of attention.

Fourthly, the group needs to be interconnected with other groups that work with similar or adjacent questions and topics. One critical example is that of any relevant working groups for doctrine. Another is that of conceptual development and experimentation groups which work on matters pertaining to information operations and the like – for instance, one of the working groups in Multinational Experiment (MNE) 6 worked on matters of strategic communication and information operations up until 2010[52], though it is unclear how the results have carried over to the ongoing MNE7. A third example can be found in any of NATO's Centers of Excellence set up to deal with related matters.

Fifthly, exercises and CD&E activities like the MNE series, but above all operations, need to be devised and used with a view to pondering the conceptual issues involved in this area. NATO's operational engagements,

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[52] Reported in *MNE 6 Framework Concept – Integrated Communication in Multinational Coalition Operations Within a Comprehensive Approach,* 22 October 2010.

past and current, offer ample data for case studies, and exercises and experiments may serve as sandboxes for trying out ideas.

Is this feasible? Absolutely. NATO and its member states have allocated significant resources to concept development over the past decade, and the active international cooperation that characterizes it constitutes a thriving environment for such projects. However, two factors require a little extra attention to facilitate success. One is the need to foster freedom of thought, so that previous definitions and truisms do not hinder creativity and outlook. The other factor is top-level leadership, to ensure sustainability of the effort. Such leadership will be fully consistent with the need for freedom of thought, to the development of which it will contribute.