



“WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND HE IS US”

AN ANALYSIS OF NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS:
THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE FORCE (ISAF)
IN AFGHANISTAN, 2003-2014.



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FOREWORD

The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence is proud to publish a report that many in the communications communities have already assessed as the most extensive, in fact exhaustive, treatment to date of the communications function throughout NATO's International Security Assistance Force campaign in Afghanistan.

The work comprises unique research elements including a detailed look at the evolution of StratCom at NATO and an innovative communications performance assessment tool. It also situates the importance of policy choice and operational execution alongside StratCom, explaining how each element of that triad is critical to realising campaign objectives. Still, as comprehensive as this paper is, there are some communications areas not covered as expansively as others due to the breadth and depth of investigation into the most complex operational undertaking in NATO's history, and to the availability, or lack thereof, of some research material, data, and other source documents. In some cases they do not exist (anymore) – in others they were not obtainable due to the security classification assigned by custodian nations.

I encourage all who read this work to keep an open mind. This is not a subject that lends itself easily to consensus, and the report's content and conclusions will not satisfy every community within NATO, nations and individual communications disciplines - nor could it. Perhaps this is why it has taken this long - recalling that NATO-led ISAF began in August 2003 - for a work of this sort to be produced. But it does turn our attention to many of the things that we should be thinking about if we mean to realise better operational outcomes.

The take-away should be acknowledgement that expecting different, better results from the same structures, same resources, and same mindset in today's information and operational environment is to cede the communication and information campaign to the adversary.

I particularly wish to thank everyone who agreed to be interviewed, shared documentation, and provided critical review as the work developed.¹ Their input was central to achieving the balance so necessary to the examination of communication operations.

The result is a compelling examination of past performance – the good, the bad and the ugly – but more important, it shines a light on the future thereby illuminating ideas of how we may continue to improve.

Surely this is a worthwhile ambition around which all communicators can rally.

Jānis Sārts

Director

NATO Strategic Communications

Centre of Excellence

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1 The research is derived from an extensive literature examination and interviews with more than 100 people. It was reviewed by a number of experts at many levels throughout the drafting process. Critical chapters were peer reviewed by 22 individuals – 11 of them military or previously military, 11 of them civilian – from 8 nations (Afghanistan, Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States). All work, or have previously worked, at the following NATO offices: NATO HQ, SHAPE, SACT, JFC Brunssum, ISAF (various offices and HQs), and the StratCom COE. They also represent those who work/have worked in StratCom, Public Affairs, PSYOPS, Info Ops, and military command positions for their nations, and as part of the NATO.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2003-2014 UN-mandated, NATO-led ISAF mission, which featured ground combat for the first time in the Alliance's history, took a tremendous human and financial toll. By ISAF mission end, well over 1 million NATO troops and civilians had served in theatre along with hundreds of thousands of contractors. Reliable studies conservatively estimate the financial cost to be at least \$1 trillion US dollars. Almost 3,500 troops under NATO command from 29 nations paid the ultimate price, and tens of thousands more suffered serious injury. Afghanistan has been a security-related point of discussion and a major part of Western military efforts for almost a fifth of NATO's existence. By virtually any metric it is the longest, most complex, expensive, challenging and fractious operation in NATO's history.

As a result of the massive NATO and international effort – by any socio-economic or human development index measure – Afghanistan in 2015 is a considerably better place as a result. That is hardly to say outcomes were optimal, or that NATO helped Afghan government forces decisively defeat the insurgency: they were not, and they did not.

A commonly held view is that NATO also 'lost' the Afghanistan strategic communication campaign. This report is an effort to deduce what is NATO and ISAF's score on that point, and if it did not 'win' outright then how did Strategic Communications (StratCom) perform?

Within the political-military leadership and even within the communications community there are factions of passionate supporters for StratCom and just as many opponents. All seem to agree conceptually of the need for better coordination as long as they are the 'coordinators' and not the 'coordinated'.

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Throughout ISAF’s duration these factions were often at odds and even as they clashed, the operating and information environment transformed. This should have led to a wholesale re-evaluation of optimal structure, process and capabilities: it did not.

Still, as to be expected from the accumulated experience of continuous operations over 11-plus years of the NATO-led ISAF mission, some new capabilities were added that improved how

NATO communicated with national domestic audiences including the Media Operations Centre and NATO TV. But the nub of the issues and the old debates – influence versus inform, the public affairs reporting relationship to the commander, measuring effect, how to better synchronise effort – are the same discussions as 5, 10 and even 15 years ago. The current impetus for reform has little to do with lessons learned during ISAF. It does however, have much to do with the Russia/Ukraine crisis.

Given the contemporary security environment, the extent to which unsatisfactory campaign outcomes should be attributed to the communication effort is not an inconsequential subject. Today’s information environment bears little resemblance to what it was at the start of the ISAF mission in 2001, in large measure a result of widespread access to reliable Internet, the ubiquity of smart phones, and the global scope and penetration of social media. In the past decade we have transitioned from grasping the implications of the ‘strategic corporal’ to dealing with the operational consequences of the ‘strategic tweet’. Adversaries also became very capable at using new communication tools to their advantage. While it may be unlikely that the Alliance will fight another mission quite like ISAF, many observations can be drawn from ISAF about whether NATO communication-related policy, doctrine, structures and capabilities are fit for purpose in future campaigns. This report offers 12 recommendations where effort and resources might be applied to achieve more favourable outcomes.

A North Atlantic Council-approved policy in August 2009 defines NATO StratCom as “the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities ... in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims.” Still, the actions and practice during ISAF demonstrate that NATO aspires to achieve more for its strategic communications investment, and that it is increasingly about understanding the desired effect or behavioural change required to shape what to do, say, show and signal to inform, persuade or influence audiences in support of specific objectives.

NATO HQs had two strategic communications campaigns to fight during the ISAF operation, the first being for the support of domestic audiences of the 51 troop contributing nations and international audiences.

Given the policy hand it was dealt, the manner in which the operation was executed for the better part of a decade, the high operational tempo at NATO and zero nominal growth (thus, downsizing) forced on it by nations, the Alliance communication effort did considerably better than it is given credit for, in particular at NATO HQ in Brussels and Allied Command Operations, and for stretches of time at ISAF. This is a finding that may strike many as counter-intuitive.

The second campaign was the operational battle for the contested population and against malign actors including the Taliban. If success is measured against information policy aims: “...create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries and potential adversaries” (Information Operations); “to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives” (Psychological Operations); and “to inform, persuade, or influence audiences in support of NATO aims and objectives” (StratCom), then the outcomes are decidedly more mixed, if not a failure.

A detailed assessment of capability and performance in this report supports the argument that ISAF was a case of a fundamentally flawed political/command structure that was by its structural nature incapable of devising and directing a unified political-military campaign. The international community brought a sense of hubris to that shattered country which had virtually no licit economy or capacity for effective governance. It set unreasonable objectives, looked for short-term metrics of success, and wholly under-resourced the mission for almost 10 years. The strategy often changed, or was confused, or was conflicted. It took few Afghan views into account.

No answer could be found to effectively deal with the vexing question of Pakistan where insurgent forces found sanctuary. NATO then proceeded to break or subsume most of the principles of war, foremost being ‘selection and maintenance of the aim’, ‘unity of effort’ and ‘unity of command’.

But how fair is that considering Afghanistan was a major *international* endeavour, that the NATO mission has lasted this long and will continue for the foreseeable future albeit in different form, that support in the country for international forces remains high, and that troop contributing nations have not endured major political recriminations from their populations? Taking a long view, the ISAF communications effort cannot have been a failure. The magnitude of collective effort by NATO nations over that period of time is a considerable expression of Alliance will and stamina. From the political-military centre of gravity perspective of “maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance”, this alone points to a strategic success broadly speaking.

This report finds that improved StratCom did not, and does not, temper the effects of bad policy and poor operational execution. In the end, strategic communications outcomes weren’t nearly what they could have been but were considerably better than critics suggest. Where policy and operations were well connected and showed results, StratCom amplified that effect. Where policy and operations were weak, negative outcomes could be mitigated but not overcome. Improving strategic communication effects needs to start with better policy, greater understanding of audiences including motivations, conducting operations following established and successful military principles, and skilled practitioners. In that respect, the weakest link in the Alliance communication effort at strategic, operational and tactical levels was the profound lack of trained, expeditionary communication- and information-related military capability in almost all NATO member nations (excepting the U.S., and perhaps Germany). For NATO to be more effective, nations need to professionalise their approach to communications by abandoning the model of employing ‘willing general service officers eager to learn on the job’ to one that is firmly based on ‘qualified, trained and experienced practitioners in all disciplines at each rank level’.

ISAF served as a forcing function for incremental albeit important improvements to NATO communication-related policy, capability and capacity aggregated over more than a decade of continuous operations. However, the transformation of the information environment happened much faster than NATO HQs and member nations were able to evolve their communications-related mindset, structures, capabilities and outputs.

The real catalyst for the current effort to make substantive reforms has been Russia’s attack on Ukraine. In this regard the Wales Summit Hybrid Warfare initiatives identified a series of actions that if implemented would be a major upgrade to the Alliance’s ability to compete in the new information environment.

READER NOTES

The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence was keen to determine the effectiveness of ISAF StratCom over the entirety of the mission, and to derive overarching lessons. This seemed a straightforward task: confirm what is meant by StratCom at NATO as defined by respective Alliance policies and doctrine, consider what practitioners and key leaders have written about the subject, and compare that against actual practice by NATO strategic HQs including ISAF.

It proved instead to be a complex issue and a significant effort. The 2009 North Atlantic Council-approved NATO political-military StratCom policy and definition does not serve to greatly illuminate the subject at hand. Six years on there is no NATO Military Committee StratCom policy¹, neither is there NATO or national StratCom doctrine though Joint Doctrine Notes, which are one rank down in the hierarchy, exist in the U.S. and UK.

Amongst the vast literature written about the Afghanistan mission from virtually every perspective, very little has been written by the communication practitioners themselves, nor is there much published *about* the work. The writings of key principals involved in the campaign offer remarkably scant fodder in this respect, usually about media ‘misrepresentations’ of their comments, thoughts on the public profile of one general by another, or reflections on conflicting narratives – ‘narrative’ being a much overused term often incorrectly used to refer to media lines.²

Actual practice borne from practitioners’ experiences offers the most promise for real insights but against what should those be compared? Existing NATO StratCom policy, NATO military communication policies and doctrinal references, aspirations of StratCom proponents, or the impact in troop contributing nations and effects on desired behaviours in Afghanistan?

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1 As of December 2015, a draft is with nations.

2 For instance, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair’s memoir, *A Journey*, spends 100 pages recounting the decision to go to war in Iraq and the fall-out. In contrast, after cobbling all the bits together throughout the book, Afghanistan merits about three pages.

INFORMATION SOURCES

This report draws in large measure from more than 100 formal and semi-structured interviews and exchanges with persons with direct knowledge and insight of the Afghanistan mission. This includes practitioners who have served at least one tour in theatre (defined as being eligible for their national service medal) or who directly worked on the Afghanistan file at a NATO or national headquarters for at least one year, or covered it as media for at least three years. Participants include serving and retired officials from several national departments of defence, development and foreign affairs; the NATO Public Diplomacy Division; civilian contractors who served in theatre; select media; former members of the NATO Military Committee; and military officers from Public Affairs, PSYOPS, Info Ops and those who closely associate themselves with StratCom. It includes interviews and feedback from participants from Canada, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, United States and United Kingdom. In this way, an effort was made to secure input from across the full breadth and scope of the mission covering the 2003-2014 period from many different work-related perspectives and from different nationalities.

The report was further informed by a review of relevant literature³ including periodicals and texts by key principals both military and civilian; an examination of ISAF news conference transcripts where available on-line (2003-2014); and NATO HQ communication products including Secretary General speeches and engagements, Media Operations Centre documentation, NATO TV programming and the *NATO Review* publication. A considerable amount of information is available on the NATO website in the form of transcripts of media opportunities with officials from dozens of Foreign Ministerial meetings, Defence Ministerial meetings, and 9 Summits over the course of

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 3 Readers interested in exploring further some of the ideas expressed in the report are guided to the following publications of particular note. The definitive work on the role and import of strategic narratives in Afghanistan is by De Graff, Dimitriu and Ringsmose (*Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War*, 2015), and an important treatment of how NATO nations managed their national campaigns is Auerswald and Saideman (*NATO in Afghanistan*, 2014). A key resource for understanding issues relating to strategic communication particularly in a military context is by Christopher Paul (*Strategic Communication*, 2011) from RAND; among this author's other publications is a major reference work on the assessment of inform, influence and persuade activities. To understand the high-level machinations and the impact of media as policy is developed at the strategic level, Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars* (2010) is a must. Retired Major-General Christopher Elliot's exceptional book *High Command* (2015) details the workings of the UK Ministry of Defence in the midst of prosecuting a two-campaign war. For the role and place of Info Ops in counter-insurgency campaigns, David Kilcullen's works are insightful, particularly *The Accidental Guerrilla* (2011). *Behavioural Conflict* (2011) by Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, is redefining how to think about influence and conflict communications. Sherard Cowper-Coles' *Cables from Kabul* (2011) provides the perspective of an engaged and engaging diplomat. A devastating critique of policy that neatly illustrates the profound challenges of operational and strategic communications during the ISAF campaign is Frank Ledwidge's *Losing Small Wars* (2011). And, the most informative book on the campaign by a key participant arguably is General Stanley McChrystal's *My Share of the Task* (2013), especially given its balance and humility.

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Communications practitioners live and operate in a world of grey not of black and white, and where more often than they would like, success is measured not by turning good into great, but by turning bad into ‘less bad’.

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the ISAF mission; NATO Spokesperson briefs; and presentations and speeches by senior NATO officials. This was supplemented by products developed for the communications communities including the Media Operations Centre’s ‘Master Narrative’ and Lines To Take, the Allied Command Operations-generated StratCom Frameworks (as of 2009); and narratives plus various documentation developed by ISAF.

There were surprisingly few substantive speeches by Chairmen of the Military Committee, Supreme Allied Commanders Europe (SACEUR), and various ISAF Commanders, or at least these are not well represented online. Few officials other than the Secretary General or Spokesperson publicly talk to media about the work of NATO; when they do, these occasions are generally on the margins of Summits, and Foreign and Defence Ministerials, and are not always on the record. Publications including the *ISAF Mirror* and a number of the Rapid Deployable Corps HQ publications offered useful insight into their particular tours. Quality books and articles by journalists with years of experience in country abound.

NATO, the U.S. and the UK are prolific generators of doctrine and military communication and information policy, and make Allied, joint or service-specific doctrinal publications widely available on line.

Info Ops and PSYOPS communities seem to be more active sharers of lessons learned than is the Public Affairs community, at least on-line. NATO’s Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC) has conducted a number of assessments of general and specific areas of interest and some proved to be of interest, but are not easily available.

Parliamentary and legislative reports and proceedings were insightful mainly because senior officers who presented remarks obviously took time to prepare for their experience.

Leading think tanks and their principal authors can have significant influence in the development of government policy recommendations and choices.⁴ Their publications can be a good barometer of issues that are of direct import to NATO and feature in national conversations. As such, this paper draws on major studies and reports from RAND, The Brookings Institution, Chatham House, the Asia Foundation, the Congressional Research Service, the United Nations, and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Not all of the NATO material used or referred to is publicly available, but most is. The benefit and value of using primary documentation as a main research source was weighed after exploratory visits to SHAPE and NATO HQ to see how complete and organised the relevant records and documentation might be. These visits suggested that a mother lode of files grouped by command or function at any period throughout the campaign was not available. Armed with familiarity of the NATO document classification system and procedures it was anticipated that a significant effort would be required to secure approval for the release of information since it is by default classified. This furthered a determination to explore and harvest the public record, and to contact as broad a cross-section of people as time would allow. It was also clear from early primary document research and interviews that what people thought of the campaign now was more honest and direct than what was captured during the mission. That is, military are hard-wired to be optimistic which is a valuable character trait particularly in a HQ during war, conflict and crisis. This can-do attitude though can be overly upbeat and selective, particularly during self-assessment over relatively short periods of time when achieving positive results is conducive to future quality assignments and promotion. Consequently, there can be the habit of understating conditions on arrival, and overstating conditions on departure.⁵

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4 For the last eight years, The University of Pennsylvania's Lauder Institute has published the most authoritative study of leading think tanks in the world: the 2014 survey examined more than 6,600 of them in 182 countries, offering insight into which nations provide the most, and best idea incubators to inform policy ideas, assessments and prescriptions. The findings, particularly as they relate to the defence and security field, are weighted considerably in favour of the U.S. and the UK. Of the top 10 think tanks in the world in all categories, 8 of 10 are located in those two countries. Think tanks from other NATO nations certainly feature in the assessment, but hardly as prominently. Germany in particular fares well in other categories including 'best network', 'best conference', and 'best with political party affiliation'. In the 'top defence and national security' category, the six leading think tanks are in the U.S. or UK, as are 16 of the first 25. Of the 85 listed, one needs to go down to number 82 (Slovakia), 83 (Hungary), and 85 (Albania) to find any leading think tanks in the nations that joined NATO since 1999. On balance, then, this monograph relies on doctrine and source material including studies and reports drawn mainly from NATO, U.S., UK and Germany (where available in English). See *2014 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, The Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania, March, 2015.

5 "Sometimes, this optimism is self-generated, and sometimes it results from pressure within the policy or military hierarchy." An informative discussion about these associated challenges is found in Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency*. RAND, 2012.

SCOPE OF REPORT ⁶

This report does not examine technical-related components meant to be coordinated by Info Ops at the tactical level including Special Technical Operations, Electronic Warfare (EW) and Computer Network Operations (CNO). These operations would surely turn up fascinating insights but are classified. Similarly other Info Ops constituent elements such as Key Leader Engagement (KLE), Presence-Posture-Profile (PPP) and Military Deception (Mil Dec) are not examined in detail.

The place, role, influence and effect of large-scale contracted support in the communication communities is not addressed in the report, and the role and impact of national civilian communications officials who served at HQs and PRTs only are peripherally considered in the paper.

This report tries to bridge the gap between an academic treatment of how things should work in theory and the reality of actual practice, at least in strategic-level HQs. It is not an effort to detail that NATO did or did not do this or that, but instead why communications was a challenge, and why many of the constraints are grounded in certain truths and realities particular to an active, consensus-based Alliance of many members.

The challenges of formulating narrative and organising effort, the constraints of money and resources, time pressures, personalities, policy dysfunction, legitimate differences of opinion over approaches, the variable skills of practitioners and capabilities of nations, spots of bad luck, and smart adversaries are unlikely to disappear in future operations.

Heretofore, NATO participated in conflicts of choice and in the end always managed to achieve at least a solid ‘pass’ in its communication efforts. Communications practitioners live and operate in a world of grey not of black and white, and where more often than they would like, success is measured not by turning good into great, but by turning bad into ‘less bad’.

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6 “A post-mortem on the broader NATO info campaign is both timely and essential. However, I don’t think you can do the whole thing, across all the contributing nations and at all levels across the entire time-frame in a single document/report, and still do the topic justice or contribute to informational capability development in any meaningful way. The problem-space is just way too big. I think it is fine to critically examine pieces of it, such as the StratCom effort (proper) or even comms at the strategic level, or even the info campaign at the operational level (if properly bounded). But, success or failure, from a strategic perspective, does not do justice to what was performed and achieved (or failed) at the tactical and operational levels...any more is an assessment of tactical success a reflection of success at the strategic level. In addition, this document really only talks about the broader public messaging aspect of the mission. There are lots of other information activities – at the tactical and operational level – that were not successful, but are worthy of recognizing and discussion.” Matthew Lauder, Defence Scientist, Defence Research and Development Canada.

Against the odds, NATO communications has managed to muddle through, which in a consensus-based Alliance can still get it to where it needs to go. The point of this work, perhaps, is how to muddle through *better*.

ACRONYMS

It is inevitable in a report of this nature that acronyms will abound though an attempt has been made to use them sparingly. Latter examples include NATO, ISAF, StratCom, PSYOPS, Info Ops, and HQ which appear frequently and are assumed to be common knowledge to the reader, as well as SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) and SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander Europe). Public Affairs is not contracted to PA to eliminate potential confusion for the NATO division Political Affairs or even Personal Assistant; and, Public Diplomacy is not PD since some military communities might instinctively think that is professional development.

TERMINOLOGY

One of the reasons for confusion about and within this domain is the inconsistent use of terminology.⁷ You will note discrepancies in the use of various terms in the paper taken from research, policy and doctrine documents and commentary provided by interviewees. Examples include the seemingly interchangeable use of the terms ‘information’ and ‘communication’, and therefore various other terms using these words such as, ‘information campaign’, ‘information war’, ‘information effects’, ‘information-related functions/capabilities/disciplines’, ‘information space’, ‘information environment’, ‘communication effort’, ‘communication practitioners’ and others.

Where they appear, these terms are attributed to the source – be it NATO, national, or personal.

However, in keeping with an ongoing project by the Multinational Information Operations Experiment (with representatives from NATO, NATO nations and partner nations) which seeks the “Simplification of existing terminology in the military communication domain by aligning it with academic and civilian-commercial practice,” to the greatest extent possible throughout this paper terms have been edited to read “‘communication and information’ campaign / effort / function / disciplines”, etc. unless it originally appeared in an excerpt from previously-written material, or in a direct quote.

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7 The Multinational Information Operations Experiment (MNIOE) currently is leading a project to harmonise communication terminology in NATO and Allied documents.

In September 2007, the Military Committee changed ‘Public Information’ to ‘Public Affairs’. The former term is used when describing the function prior to the change or when it was used in interviews. And, in the U.S., in the U.S., Info Ops is IO, and PSYOPS activities are Military Information Support Operations (MISO).

MILITARY RANK

Within each chapter an individual’s rank is used in a first reference, thereafter just their last name unless the rank begins a sentence. If the name appears again in another chapter, that style is repeated.

SPELLING

This paper uses English (United Kingdom) spelling⁸ unless a word is part of an official title or entity. As an example, the UK English spelling of ‘defence’ is used except when, for example, there is mention of ‘Secretary of Defense Gates’ wherein the U.S. spelling is used. Similarly, the UK centre, theatre, honour, favour, organise are used rather than the U.S. center, theatre, honor, favor, organize.

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8 UK English is the official NATO spelling.

This report is dedicated to:
all information community practitioners who
served the mission.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

THE FALLEN
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Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

This paper is an examination of NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Strategic Communications (StratCom) during 2003-2014 from a NATO HQ and ISAF HQ perspective, with particular focus on Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy, PSYOPS, and the integrating function Info Ops. It aims to discern how effective the collective effort was, and to understand the factors that contributed to both shortcomings and successes. Conclusions from the ISAF experience are drawn and recommendations made to inform future operations, including where applicable to structures, processes and doctrine.

At the end of December 2014, in a low-key ceremony in a basketball gym at its HQ in Kabul, Afghanistan, the green ISAF flag was lowered and sheathed for the last time. This milestone marked the transition of full responsibility for security to Afghan national security forces, and signalled NATO's assessment that the main campaign goal was now realised – that the country would “never again be a safe haven for terrorists.”

By mission end more than 1 million NATO troops and civilians had deployed, and alongside them hundreds of thousands of contractors.¹ Reliable studies conservatively estimate the financial cost to be at least a \$1 trillion US dollars.² Almost 3,500 troops under NATO command from 29 nations paid the ultimate price, and tens of thousands more suffered serious injury. Nine NATO Summits featured discussions on Afghanistan and it will be on the agenda for a 10th time in Warsaw in 2016.

1 A general figure can be inferred. U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, in introductory remarks for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in March 2015, noted that "over 850,000 American troops and civilians and thousands more contractors, have served and sacrificed in Afghanistan since 2001." The second largest troop contributor to the mission (UK) had between 5,000-9,500 deployed there at any one time for more than 7 years, and the third largest contributor (Germany) regularly had between 3,000-5,000 over the same period. These three countries alone, then, would account for a figure of at least 1,000,000 military. The number of contractors supporting just U.S. operations in Afghanistan regularly exceeded the number of its deployed forces: at its height in June 2012, there were 113,736 contractors. (Moshe Schwartz and Jennifer Church, *Department of Defense's Use of Contractors to Support Military Operations: Background, Analysis, and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, May 17, 2013. Also see Table 3: ISAF Force Structure: Selected Elements, 2002-2014.

2 Estimates vary widely. The most comprehensive treatment of the subject is Amy Belasco's examination of appropriations for operations in Afghanistan, finding the cost from FY 2001 to FY 2015 to be \$743.7 billion US (appropriations excludes items such as life-time health care costs, deficit-related interest, destroyed equipment, and equipment transfers to the Afghans). These amounts were apportioned to Defense (92%), State and USAID (6%), and Veteran's Affairs (1%). See Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2014. One study by an assiduous researcher concludes the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars will cost the U.S. between \$4-6 trillion, including long-term health care. She calculates the decision to finance those operations through borrowing has already added \$2 trillion to the U.S. national debt, about 20% of the total added between 2001 and 2012; and, that by 2013 the U.S. had already paid \$260 billion in interest on the war debt. This does not include the interest payable in the future, which will reach into the trillions. See Linda Bilmes, *The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets*, Harvard Kennedy School, March 2013.

Fifty-one nations contributed forces over the 13 year ISAF mission, 11 under NATO lead.³ In ISAF's place is Resolute Support, a two-year non-combat training and support mission, with a force of some 13,000 troops from 42 countries in addition to a small U.S.-led counter-terrorism element.⁴ Plans are underway at NATO HQ to determine the size, scale and scope of yet another commitment and evolution of the mission after that. It is a campaign that has lasted longer than World War 1, World War 2 and the Korean War combined, all the while without substantive domestic public discontent and little political recrimination about the mission within troop contributing nations.

Afghanistan has been a security-related point of discussion and a major part of Western military efforts for almost a fifth of NATO's existence. By virtually any metric it is the longest, most complex, expensive, challenging and fractious deployed operation in NATO's history.

As a result of that massive NATO and international investment, Afghanistan in 2015 is a considerably better place by any socio-economic or human development index measure. That is hardly to say that outcomes were optimal, or that NATO helped Afghan government forces decisively defeat the insurgency: they were not, and they did not. The threat to Afghans from conflict is ever-present, with 2014 witnessing the highest number of civilian casualties since the UN began documenting statistics in 2009, with almost three-quarters of the cases being caused by Anti-Government Elements which include the Taliban.⁵ As recently as October 2015, government forces were forced to cede the city of Kunduz to the Taliban for a short period of time before it was retaken by Afghan national security forces with the assistance of the U.S. military. The respected commentator Ahmed Rashid is concerned that the whole country is now threatened, with Afghan officials telling him, "The Taliban pose a grave threat to some seventeen of the country's thirty-four provinces. Of those, a half dozen are in danger of falling completely into Taliban control, including Helmand and Uruzgan in the south."⁶ As a result of the unstable security situation in October 2015, President Obama committed to keeping 5,500 U.S. forces in theatre into 2017.

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3 NATO uses the figure of 51 troop contributing nations.

4 http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_02/20150227_1502-RSM-Placemat.pdf

5 Almost 3,700 were killed and more than 6,800 injured in 2014, a 22 per cent increase over the year before. Anti-Government Elements were responsible for 72 per cent of the casualties, 12 per cent by Afghan national security forces and 2 per cent by international forces. Ten per cent could not be attributed to one group, and 3 per cent were caused by explosive remnants of the war. UNAMA and UNHCR, *Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, February 2015.

6 http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2015/oct/19/can-afghanistan-hold-on-taliban/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report

It looks like NATO is not finished with Afghanistan and that country is not finished with NATO. This was not the plan from the start. Donors meeting in Tokyo in January 2002 to commit to a recovery plan for Afghanistan were told that the reconstruction would cost anywhere from \$11.4 to \$18.1 billion over the next decade, of which \$1.2-1.7 billion would be needed for Afghan security forces, police, mine action and drug control.⁷

Taking a long view, though, ISAF StratCom cannot have been a failure. The magnitude of collective effort by NATO nations over that period of time is a considerable expression of Alliance will and stamina. From the political-military centre of gravity perspective of “maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance”, this alone points to a strategic success broadly speaking. Support for military forces in NATO nations has rarely been higher. Polls by the Asia Foundation and NATO’s own figures show variable but consistently favourable results for how Afghans viewed the international intervention.⁸ Public opinion polls in troop contributing nations started high and declined when it was patently obvious by about 2008 that the mission was failing, but the figures trended better than the reality should have suggested. Political and military recriminations were few: one government fell (the Dutch), one government barely avoided censure in Parliament (the Canadians), two ISAF Commanders were relieved of command, and in Germany three senior officials resigned over the Kunduz tanker incident.

Afghanistan, labelled by some commentators as the “Good War” in contrast to Iraq, seemed initially to bear all the hallmarks of being eminently “winnable”. The fast passage of a firm UN mandate for intervention was indicative of broad international support to rid the country of the theocratic Taliban government that had given shelter to Al-Qaida operatives including those who planned the 9-11 attacks on the U.S..

The American-led coalition’s swift removal of the Taliban from power, followed by the establishment of a well-subscribed International Security Assistance Force, was broadly popular in large swaths of Afghanistan, with the promise of some respite following decades of Soviet occupation and ruinous conflict. It was an encouraging beginning. Support to root out terrorist networks and to help provide security to rebuild Afghanistan was high, especially since the rationale that it was needed to keep streets in the West safe from attack seemed plausible at the time.

7 UN press release AFG/181, DEV/2363, PI/1395, 21 January 2002.

8 That said, the figures of high popular support do not accord very well with many actual desired behaviours including the frequency of attacks on NATO forces and the lack of support for counter-narcotics efforts, to name just two.

And after so much strife, if anyone could or should benefit from a bit of Western aid largesse, then the long-suffering people of Afghanistan certainly deserved a break. It was a compelling case and one that appealed to NATO members, partners, and like-minded nations. Initially 18 countries contributed forces to ISAF⁹, 32 when NATO assumed mission command,¹⁰ and 50 in December 2012, the most at any one time under the ISAF flag.¹¹

By August 2006, NATO was three years into ISAF and Afghanistan was very much the Alliance's top operational priority. Expansion to the South and East that year exposed deep fissures of force generation, caveats, and the spectre if not the fact of a two-tiered Alliance. For the first time in its history ground forces under its command were engaged in close combat. The tenacity of the campaign faced by NATO forces caught most troop contributing nations off-guard and served notice that the South and East of Afghanistan were definitely not like the relatively calm North or the West. Suddenly the caskets arriving home were increasingly non-American. This was unexpected in a "reconstruction and development support" mission which had risk but meant to be distinct from the more aggressive U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) counter-terrorism mission taking place in Afghanistan at the same time. For some ISAF nations these were the first combat-related deaths since the Second World War and media reports bore dramatic, first-hand accounts of the difficult operating environment and intense fighting.

It took a long time to acknowledge the plan was not working well, and in fact was leading the Alliance to ignominious, unthinkable defeat. The turn-around began only in mid-2009, almost 8 years after the fall of the Taliban government, with General Stanley McChrystal's assessment of the situation, the momentum of his command, and President Obama's explanation of the U.S. policy review later that year. The combination provided for the first time, an honest overview, a cogent narrative, and a detailed plan supported by an influential, vocal stakeholder community and new capabilities. It changed how the mission operated and was perceived including elevating the role, focus and resourcing of strategic communications at ISAF HQ to 175 uniformed people with a \$260 million budget, 90% of that American.

Though ISAF was wobbly at times, it held together for more than a decade so something positive was at play, though there is no shortage of commentators, politicians and military leaders who assess otherwise, as this short book title selection illustrates:

9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Security_Assistance_Force

10 <http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2003/08-august/e0811a.htm>

11 A breakdown of troop contributing nations from 2007-on is available on the "ISAF placemats" and available at <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/107995.htm>.

The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan (Jack Fairweather)

Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan (Frank Ledwidge)

Power Struggle: An Inside Look at What Went Wrong (Kai Eide)

War against the Taliban: Why it All Went Wrong in Afghanistan (Sandy Gall)

Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars (Dan Bolger)

The book, “How NATO Won the ISAF Communication and Information Campaign” is unlikely to be written. A popular refrain being NATO lost that as well and worse, to people operating from caves. The top 10 shortcomings most often cited are:

- NATO did not have a compelling, easily understood narrative
- The narrative was not consistent
- Commanders were ‘off message’
- Communication practitioners were not sufficiently skilled
- Communication capabilities were not organised effectively
- The Alliance did not ‘get the good news out’
- NATO was too slow at responding to events
- Messages didn’t resonate with Afghan audiences
- Insurgents had a more effective communication campaign
- Media only reported bad news

That is a compelling indictment, and not entirely unfair. But looking at it only through this lens suggests that the required fixes to realise better outcomes relate just to a need for better execution of communications.

At issue in this report is coming to terms with assessing how did NATO/ ISAF StratCom ‘do’? First, a definition is in order. Beyond matching actions with words, when the ISAF Commander (COMISAF) ordered, “Let’s get some StratCom on this!” what did that mean, what was supposed to happen, and what did success look like? Figure 1 illustrates the ‘friendly forces’ at work in Afghanistan that were conducting communication activities, and Figure 2, the extent of the StratCom challenge.

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StratCom within NATO aspires to be about understanding the desired information effect or behaviour to help shape what to do, say, show and signal in order to inform, persuade or influence audiences in support of specific objectives.

”

Defining StratCom is the first challenge to establishing how effective it was and what effect it had. The term means many things in an Alliance of 28 nations. Is it a process, mindset, or capability – a critical distinction affecting structure and resources. There is also animosity between the constituent parts that in NATO includes Public Diplomacy, civilian Public Affairs, military Public Affairs, PSYOPS, and Info Ops with many affiliated functions. And now, StratCom.¹² They all compete for resources, access, and influence. Decision

makers wrestle with making sense of it. Practitioners are confused. And NATO nations are all less secure as a result.

This report concludes that StratCom within NATO’s military aspires to be about understanding the desired information effect or behaviour to help shape what to do, say, show and signal in order to inform, persuade or influence audiences in support of specific objectives.

The second challenge is to establish what to measure it against. The extant NATO StratCom policy of 2009 which describes StratCom as the “coordinated and appropriate use” of the various related capabilities ... whatever that really means? What about the campaign’s political end-state? (“A self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government able to exercise its sovereign authority, independently, throughout Afghanistan”). Or whether all of NATO’s actions matched all of its words? By any of these accounts StratCom would seem to be a failure, which hardly seems fair. When Afghan farmers grow poppy to provide for their families or officials indulge in corruption, a long-standing practice in the country, is this a failure of the Alliance PSYOPS effort meant to influence attitudes and behaviour? When the work of a Danish cartoonist incites violence, and when a Florida preacher burns Korans and triggers riots causing death in Afghanistan, does this signal that the ISAF public affairs effort is adrift?

The question to help focus on the problem set is: does fixing the Top 10 list of communication shortcomings with the right structure, the right resourcing and the right training – keeping all other policy variables the same – provide optimal outcomes? The overwhelming evidence of those who have written about Afghanistan and participants of this report suggests not. The collective view seems to be that the international community brought a sense of hubris to that shattered country which had virtually no licit economy or capacity for effective governance. The international community set unreasonable objectives, looked for short-term metrics of success, and wholly under-resourced the mission for almost 10 years. The strategy often changed, or was confused, or was conflicted. It took few Afghan views into account using ways and means that could be construed as serving NATO nations’ interests more than Afghans. No answer could be found on how to effectively deal with the vexing question of Pakistan where insurgent forces found sanctuary. NATO then proceeded to break or subsume most of the principles of war, foremost being ‘selection and maintenance of the aim’, ‘unity of effort’ and ‘unity of command’. It made little effort, at least initially, to understand the Afghan condition and what motivated behaviour.

Fixing the Top 10 list does not help with much of that. Of the various conclusions, findings and recommendations, the following 3-Up (good points), 3-Down (bad points), and 3-Way Ahead (recommendations) represent key outcomes.

3-UP

First, nations frequently did not play well in the sandbox, often acting at NATO’s expense. Combined with the policy hand it was dealt and the manner in which the operation was executed for the better part of a decade, Alliance StratCom did considerably better than it is given credit for, particularly at NATO HQ and Allied Command Operations, and for stretches of time at ISAF.¹³ Four things help account for this: a catastrophic event (9-11), with a UN mandate and a rationale for intervention that at first was easily understood; broad-based consensus in NATO nations for more than a decade; genuine, earnest and relatively consistent messaging from NATO HQs over time; and lots of good news stories.

The last two points are perhaps counter-intuitive and require explanation. It is accurate to say successive Secretaries General made a sustained commitment to communicate the ISAF mission to a wider range of international audiences. The effort by a majority of communication practitioners in theatre was also commendable.

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In particular at ISAF under the commands of Generals Richards, McChrystal, Allen and Dunford.

But a large measure of success can be attributed to a small number of staff at NATO HQs, some of whom fought the campaign almost from the beginning.¹⁴ They obtained a deep understanding of the operating environment. They built relationships in and outside of theatre with media, influencers and opinion shapers. They provided valuable continuity at political-military levels from Brussels and Kabul, and effected value-added liaison including messaging with national capitals. It was a focused effort if not richly resourced. They guided, shaped, cajoled and mentored practitioners, many having deployed with no background in any communications field. They had a NATO agenda with NATO messaging.

As one commentator observed, “News media provided a mirror, not a prism. If you didn’t like what you saw, it was because the truth hurt. It hurt a lot during this war.”¹⁵ The good news was not a regular lead item in the major media outlets that opinion leaders were following, but rather in the many stories of individual success and good deeds told by the tens of thousands of ISAF veterans when they shared their experiences at schools, ballparks, arenas, Legions, and with community groups and hometown media. This huge Alliance-wide military outreach was a major positive force that sustained public support. The continuous spotlight was also the catalyst for many populations to re-connect with their military forces with a depth of feeling and pride unmatched in a generation. This was not scripted – it emerged organically from individuals and communities interested in showing their support and respect for service and sacrifice.

Second, synchronising in-theatre military communication-related capabilities by grouping them together in a StratCom structure led by a general officer elicits better outcomes than alternative structures. This is a core part of the report but is not a universally held view: more about this later.

Third, was the tremendous proliferation of a professional and competitive Afghan media, and the newly established ability of the Afghan government and institutions to communicate with its citizens. Over time, NATO was a key facilitator of this which included supporting the establishment of the telecommunications backbone, promoting the development of Afghan media, training and capacity building by Public Affairs with various Ministries, building PSYOPS capacity in the Afghan army, and encouraging the stand-up of the Afghan Government Media Information Centre.¹⁶ Enabling effective Host Nation capability in public communications is a big part of a successful drawdown or exit strategy.

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14 To make clear, it is important to note that this report's author does not fit any of these categories.

15 Lieutenant-General Dan Bolger, *Why We Lost* (2014), p. 424.

16 This initiative is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.12.

3-DOWN

First, very frequently the actions of the international community writ large as well as NATO did not match its words, so the communication effort regularly fell apart at the policy and operational execution levels. The inability to reconcile the NATO ISAF mission and the U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom and the related challenge of dealing with Afghan civilian casualties, was the most decisive shortcoming in the military and communication effort. On this point former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wrote, “I did not get this and other command problems in Afghanistan fully fixed until 2010 ... I should have seized control of the matter well before that. It was my biggest mistake in overseeing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.”¹⁷

This say-do gap was in large measure the result of a lack of an effective international and NATO comprehensive approach, the latter a function of the churn associated with the tremendous turn-over of NATO forces and leaders in theatre. Excepting the last quarter of 2014, Afghan President Karzai served throughout ISAF’s existence. During that same period there were 16 COMISAFs from 7 countries and 11 commanders of Regional Command (South), 17 including when that command was split in two. There were 4 Secretaries General; 5 Supreme Allied Commanders Europe (SACEUR); and 9 U.S., 8 Canadian, and 5 British Ambassadors.¹⁸

When the NATO Senior Civilian Representative’s spokesperson in Kabul left after three years in post he had worked for three ambassadors, four commanders, three ISAF spokespersons, and five military heads of communication. His UN counterpart had changed three times.¹⁹ In contrast, since mid-2005 there have been just two NATO Spokespersons and one lead official at SHAPE driving StratCom.

“The inability to reconcile the ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom and the challenge of dealing with Afghan civilian casualties was the single most decisive shortcoming in the military and communication effort.”

17 Robert Gates, *Duty* (2014), p. 340.

18 For an overview, see Table 1: Timeline of Select Key Principals in the ISAF Campaign.

19 Notes provided by Dominic Medley.

Over that same period there were at least 12 military heads of communication at ISAF HQ of which only 2 were professional communicators. This, in a complex setting where ‘time in’ is key to establishing relationships and thus understanding.

Second, it is not a stretch to say that NATO knew better. Afghanistan offers little in terms of StratCom ‘lessons’ not already known. When putting the first NATO-led command together in 2003 for instance, military authorities told the force commander to plan for an 85-person HQ, that a future operations (J5) planning function wasn’t required in theatre (it would be “fine to reach back when needed”), and the communications staff would be one major. This in spite of the desire and intent even then to expand the role and reach of NATO within ISAF. The HQ eventually grew to a barely sufficient number only at the insistence of nations with the most to lose that tour.²⁰

Third, Secretaries General, and NATO and ISAF spokespersons were often left to hang on their own. Few national NATO leaders made talking about the mission an ongoing priority, especially when times got tough and the notion that forces were in Afghanistan to stop the export of terrorism had lost its veneer. When they did publicly comment the message wasn’t necessarily aligned with or helpful to NATO. The mission was variously described as being about bringing democracy to Afghanistan, not being a war, or about NATO aiming to decisively defeat the Taliban. Comments set unreasonable expectations about what success looked like and the timeline for it. Operation Enduring Freedom regularly opted for messaging about their operations that simply strained credulity, particularly with respect to Special Forces operations and how insurgents but no civilians had been killed – egregious claims that often proved to be wrong. Other actors including the UN mission were publicly critical of ISAF as was President Karzai, who during his last five years in office was an increasingly strident critic. The capacity of civilians at Provincial Reconstruction Teams to explain what they were doing was seriously deficient. And it wasn’t until late 2008 that the Afghan government started having real capacity to communicate nationwide to its citizens. With ISAF often the lone voice, everything looked and sounded like a military problem.

WAY AHEAD

What lessons may we derive from the Afghanistan experience? Mainly, that the Top 10 list of communication shortcomings is important to fix, but too simple a calculus.

Improving StratCom outcomes needs to start with better policy, greater understanding of audiences including motivations for behaviour, and conducting operations following established and successful military principles. In non-opposed air campaigns, peace support missions and humanitarian interventions, NATO's communication efforts have been successful and compare favourably to other large organisations, particularly given the level of resources invested. For 'everything else' including sustained combat, not-quite-operations (such as hybrid warfare), or if NATO was to take on Daesh/ISIL or its affiliates, then much remains to be done – in part because opponents can be unrestrained in putting lies and information effect at the core of their strategy.

The report findings suggest three prescriptions related to the communications functions as being particularly important:

Build national and NATO capability. Four nations – the U.S., UK, Germany and Canada – provided most of the deployed communication and leadership assets with various countries including Romania and Poland providing some PSYOPS capability. Denmark deserves real credit for establishing NATO TV. How is it possible though, in light of NATO's collective operational experience and a transformed information environment, that most members and partner militaries still do not have professional, full-time deployable capabilities in the field of public affairs, let alone long-standing operational communications disciplines including PSYOPS and Info Ops, and now StratCom?

Professionalisation is key: filling a public affairs position with someone who has no media experience risks bad communications guidance and decisions. A military member with no background, education or experience in cultural studies is not the most effective judge of what PSYOPS products will resonate with Afghan audiences. And, a non-commissioned member with no formal imagery training but "who wanted a tour and had a good eye" is not the right videographer to deploy to NATO HQ (especially without equipment). "It is remarkable," said one NATO public affairs officer, "that almost every nation in NATO can turn out trained and qualified fighter pilots and see them progress through two or three ranks doing that, but only three or four nations in all of NATO can do the same thing with a public affairs officer."²¹

Fix NATO Doctrine. There is a currently a confusion of doctrine and policy which is akin to doctrinal fratricide, a result of a mix and jumble of Allied Joint Publications, Military Policies, and Directives that are not integrated. A fit for purpose framework matters and the NATO StratCom 2009 policy is not fit for purpose, a situation made more glaring in the absence of Military Committee policy.

A small critical mass of military practitioners is stuck in a repetitive cycle of writing, reviewing and revising various communication and information-related doctrine, policy and other instruments, which focuses their effort ‘down and in’ (talking amongst themselves), not ‘up and out’ (executing external communications). Realising better communications outcomes will require creating the structure and conditions for communication functions to work better together and reduce the impact of firewalls embedded in doctrine that militates against coordination and synchronisation of effort.

There is ongoing discussion about the names of Info Ops and PSYOPS, and whether they should be changed (not the functions, the names). Some²² argue they are longstanding terms and change would add confusion. Others, including this author, argue that even if wrongly discredited these names have pernicious, connotative meaning that impacts the ability of NATO member publics and senior non-military officials to understand the nature of the communication effort, and hinders efforts at working more closely with non-military organisations in theatre. A few even make the argument that Info Ops as a coordinating function is obsolete and should no longer exist.

Enhance Understanding, and More Effective Engagement. These are related, but separate ideas. First, better ties with the private sector and engaging specialists in behavioural research and product development are must-haves. This should take the form of Target Audience Analysis, intelligence support attuned to non-kinetic critical information requirements, and regular audits of the critical PSYOPS function. Measures of effect (the degree to which efforts led to desired outcomes) need to be the measure of success, not measures of performance (a count of the number of communication products produced, for example).

Understanding requires long-term engagement and resources. For instance, though NATO has global partners, has conducted operations on four continents and directly assisted Muslim populations in 7 non-member countries (8 including NATO member Turkey), there is no NATO Information Office in the Middle East, or Africa or Asia.

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 22 A defence scientist, during peer review of this document wrote, “I remain unconvinced that Info Ops and PSYOPS need to be rebranded. Little scientific research has been conducted on the issues of source credibility and target audience trust and rapport as it relates to military information activities. I would argue that, due to various technological innovations in communications technology (social media being the main one), audience expectations for information are evolving, and that we (as a scientific community) still don’t have a handle on it. In addition, the benefit or value of rebranding PSYOPS and Info Ops to something else has not been clearly articulated in any document. In addition, the challenges and issues of calling capabilities PSYOPS and Info Ops have not been studied in any substantial manner. We may be creating a problem or issue where none truly exists.”

In short, NATO nations and NATO HQ did not anticipate the scale and scope of the effort required to prosecute the ISAF information campaign, and systemic issues constrained the organisation's ability to course correct quickly. Afghanistan was the forcing function for modest change and the establishment of new or enhanced capabilities over years of continuous operations. However, it is unquestionably Russia's annexation of Crimea that has been the catalyst for broader reform.

Though messaging from NATO nations was often discordant, the NATO HQ and ISAF information campaign was much more effective than it often is given credit for. There were many communication-related shortcomings over time, but unsatisfactory outcomes in theatre were a result mainly of Western hubris, a lack of understanding of the Afghan people, and for half the ISAF effort, the distraction of the Iraq war.

If one insists the mark of success is that all nations gave maximum effort at all times with no caveats or restrictions on forces, that parties worked in alignment to foster a self-sustaining, democratic and self-sufficient Afghanistan, and that the behaviours of malign actors changed, then one is bound to be disappointed. Mission expectations were set unreasonably high. Politically the Alliance held together and emerged stronger as a result. All NATO nations contributed forces (or people, technically, in the case of Iceland) to the largest, most complex and most costly expeditionary mission in its history, some for a decade or more. Many have agreed to stay in what appears to be an open-ended commitment to continue the work. A significant number of traditional and unexpected partners also contributed forces. NATO forces fought against a determined adversary and took significant casualties: the notion that 'coming home in body bags' would cause support to evaporate and lead to wholesale troop pull-out did not substantively materialise. The ISAF mission put Germans back onto the battlefield, if reluctantly and not to everyone's full satisfaction, and helped bring France back in the integrated NATO military structure. It tested and forced change to many long-standing NATO policies, procedures and doctrine, and enhanced capabilities.

The Top 10 communication shortcomings are important to fix. However, a campaign cannot feature multiple major policy failings including counter-narcotics, counter-corruption and police reform, as well as be vested with operational execution problems including the multi-headed chain of command, and expect StratCom to win the war. StratCom is not magic pixie dust to sprinkle around to make bad things better.

Improving StratCom outcomes need to start with better policy; greater understanding of audiences including motivations; skilled practitioners in all disciplines and at all rank levels; and conducting operations following established and successful military principles. StratCom is evolving as a valuable line of activity because it is serving as a fixing function to sort disjointed doctrine, weak training, and under-resourced capability in virtually every NATO nation.

A fix is not easy, and there are definitely two sides of the same coin. As Admiral Mike Mullen, the respected former U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff famously wrote, “I would argue that most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all. They are policy and execution problems.”²³ On the flip side, as David Kilcullen has written but perhaps less famously, “Building a strategic information warfare capability is perhaps the most important of our many capability challenges in this new era of hybrid warfare.”²⁴

Both are right.

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 23 Admiral Mike Mullen, "From the Chairman: Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 55 (Fourth Quarter, October 2009).

24 Kilcullen (2011), *Accidental Guerrilla*, p. 301.

Figure 1

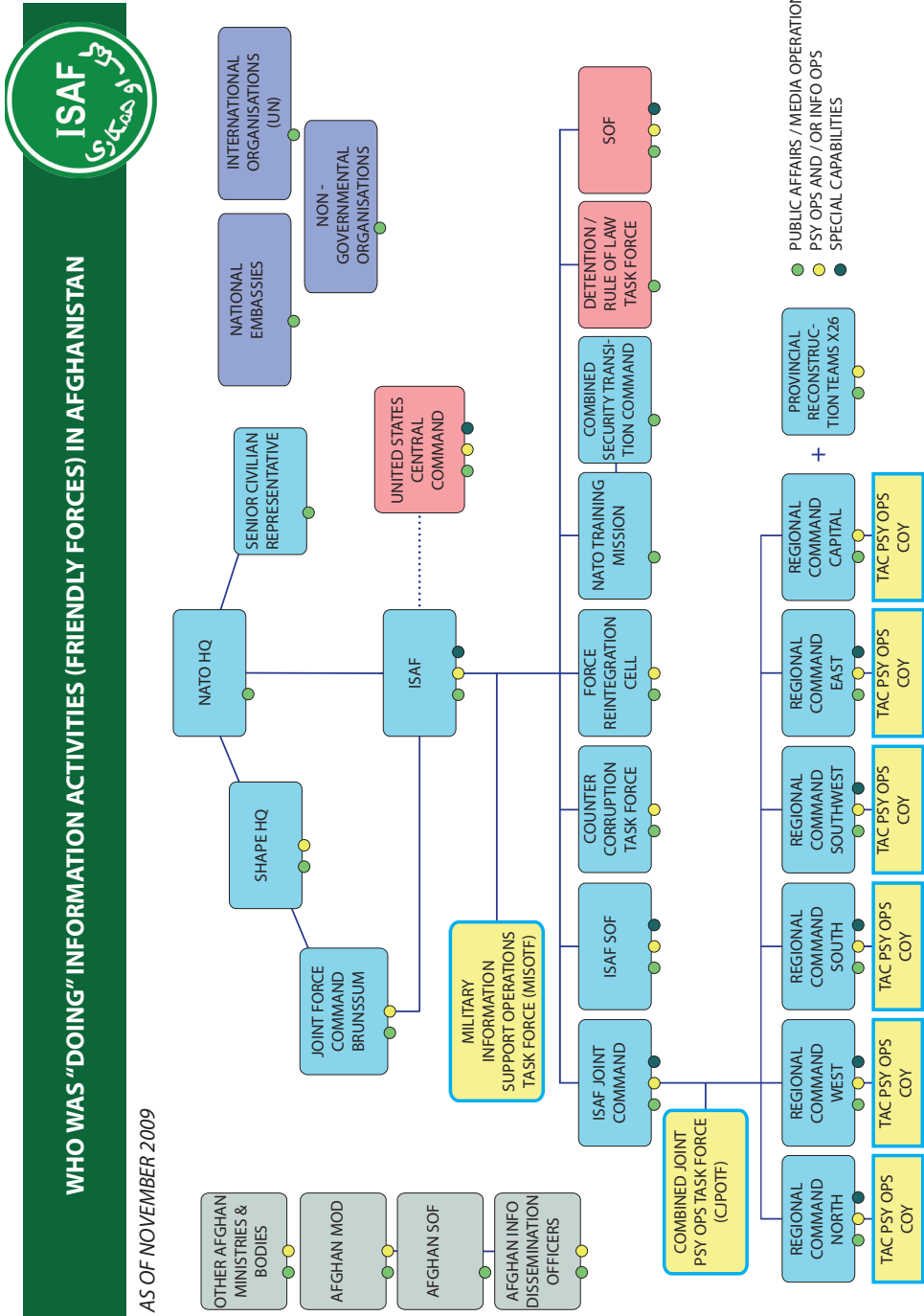


Figure 2

THE ISAF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE



ALL ACTIONS, WORDS, IMAGES, SIGNALLING TO BE: COHERENT, CONSISTENT, COMPELLING, COORDINATED!

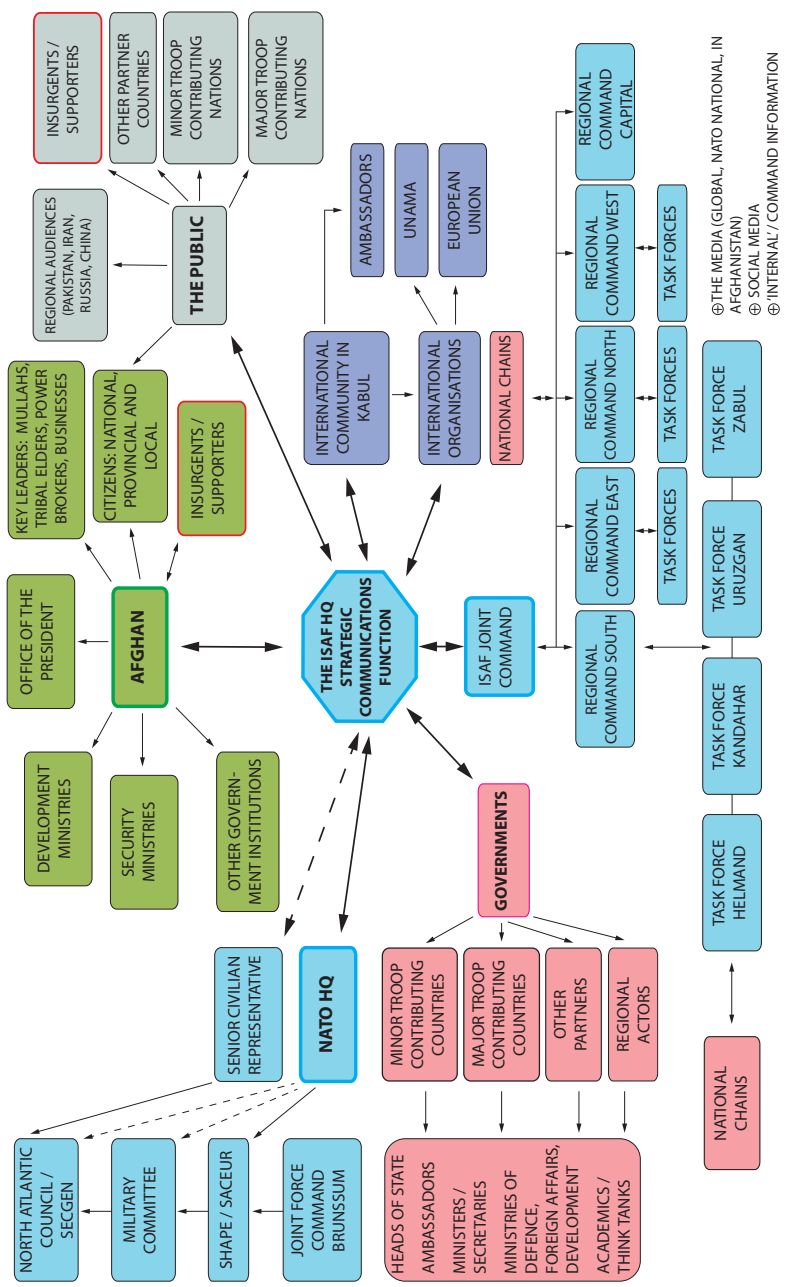


Table 1: Overview timeline of select key principles in the ISAF campaign 2001-2014

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW TIMELINE OF SELECT KEY PRINCIPALS IN THE ISAF CAMPAIGN 2001-2014

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
AFG President		HAMID KARZAI			
AFG Min of Defence		MOHAMMED FAHIM			GEN ABDUL RAHIM WARDAK
AFG CHOD			GEN BISMILLAH KHAN MOHAMMADI		
NATO SEC GEN	GEORGE ROBERTSON			JAAP DE HOOP SCHEFFER	
NATO Snr Civ Rep				HIKMET CETIN	
U.S. AMB TO AFG		RYAN CROCKER	ROBERT FINN	ZALMAY KHALILZAD	RONALD NEUMANN
UK AMB TO AFG					
CAN AMB TO AFG			CHRIS ALEXANDER		SPROULE
COMISAF		MGEN JOHN MCCOLL	MGEN NORBERT VAN HEYST	LGEN GOETZ GLEMEROTH	LGEN ETHEM ERDAGI
ISAF Joint Comd				LGEN RICK HILLIER	GEN DEL VECCHIO
Comd RC South					
NATO CMC					
SACEUR	ADM GUIDO VENTURONI		GEN HARALD KUJAT		GEN HENAULT
U.S. President	GEN JOSEPH RALSTON		GEN JIM JONES		
U.S. SecDef	GEORGE W. BUSH				
U.S. CHOD	DONALD RUMSFELD				
UK Prime Minister	GEN HUGH SHELTON	GEN RICHARD MYERS			GEN PACE
UK SecStateDef	TONY BLAIR				
CAN Prime Minister	GEN GEORGE MELODY				
CAN Min of Defence	JEAN CHRETIEN	ADM SIR MICHAEL BOYCE	GEN SIR MICHAEL WALKER		
CAN CHOD	ART EGGLETON	JOHN MCCALLUM		PAUL MARTIN	
FRA President	GEN RAY HENAULT			DAVID PRATT	BILL GRAHAM
FRA MinDef	JACQUES CHIRAC				GEN RICK HILLIER
FRA CHOD	ALAIN RICHARD	MICHELE ALLOT-MARIE			
GER Chancellor	GEN J-P KELCHE	GEN HENRI BENTEGET			
GER Min of Defence	GERHARD SCHRODER				MERKEL
GER CHOD	RUDOLF SCHARPING	PETER STRUCK			JUNG
ITA Prime Minister	GEN HARALD KUJAT	GEN WOLFGANG SCHNEIDERHAN			
ITA Min of Defence	SILVIO BERLUSCONI				
ITA CHOD	ANTONIO MARTINO				
POL President	GEN ROLANDO MOSCHINI				ADM GIAMPAOLO DI PAOLA
POL Min of Defence	ALEKSANDER KWASNIEWSKI				
POL CHOD	JERZY SZMAJDZINSKI				
	GEN CZESLAW PIATAS				

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	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
AFG President	HAMID KARZAI				
AFG Min of Defence	GEN ABDUL RAHIM WARDAK				
AFG CHOD	GEN BISMILLAH KHAN MOHAMMADI				GEN KARIMI
NATO SecGen	JAAP DE HOOP SCHEFFER				ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN
NATO Snr Civ Rep	HIKMET CETIN	DANN EVERTS	MAURITS JOCHEMS	FERNANDO GENTILINI	MARK SEDWILL
U.S. AMB TO AFG	RONALD NEUMANN		WILLIAM WOOD	KARL EIKENBERRY	
UK AMB TO AFG	STEPHEN EVANS	SHERARD COWPER-COLES		MARK SEDWILL	
CAN AMB TO AFG	DAVID SPROULE	ARIF LALANI		WILLIAM CROSBY	
COMISAF	GEN DAVID RICHARDS	GEN DAN MCNEIL		GEN DAVID MCKERNAN	GEN PETRAEUS
ISAF Joint Comd	DEL VECCHIO			GEN DAVID MCKERNAN	GEN DAVID RODRIGUEZ
Comd RC South	BGEN DAVID FRASER	MGEN TON VAN LOON	MGEN JACKO PAGE	MGEN MARG LESSARD	MGEN NICK CARTER
Comd RC SouthWest				MGEN MART DE KRUIF	MGEN RICHARD MILLS
NATO CMC	GEN RAY HENAULT			ADM GIAMPAOLO DI PAOLA	
SACEUR	GEN JIM JONES	GEN BANTZ CRADDOCK		ADM JAMES STAVRIDIS	
U.S. President	GEORGE W. BUSH			BARACK OBAMA	
U.S. SecDef	DONALD RUMSFELD	ROBERT GATES			
U.S. CHOD	GEN PETER PACE		ADM MIKE MULLEN		
UK Prime Minister	TONY BLAIR		GORDON BROWN		DAVID CAMERON
UK SecStateDef	JOHN REID	DES BROWNE		JOHN HUTTON	LIAM FOX
UK CHOD	GEN WALKER	AIR CHIEF MARSHAL SIR JOCK STIRRUP		ROB AINSWORTH	GEN RICHARDS
CAN Prime Minister	MARTIN	STEPHEN HARPER			
CAN Min of Defence	GRAHAM	GORDON O'CONNOR		PETER MACKAY	
CAN CHOD	GEN RICK HILLIER			GEN WALT NATYNCZYK	
FRA President	JACQUES CHIRAC		NICOLAS SARKOZY		
FRA MinDef	MICHELE ALLIOT-MARIE	HERVE MORIN			ALAIN JUPPE
FRA CHOD	GEN BENTEGET	GEN J.L. GEORGELIN			ADM EDOUARD GUILLAUD
GER Chancellor	ANGELA MERKEL				
GER Min of Defence	FRANZ JOSEF JUNG			KARL-THEODOR ZU GUTTENBERG	
GER CHOD	GEN WOLF GANG SCHNEIDERHAN			GEN VOLKER WIEKER	
ITA Prime Minister	BERLUSCONI	ROMANO PRODI		SILVIO BERLUSCONI	
ITA Min of Defence	MARTINO	ARTURO PARISI			
ITA CHOD	ADM GIAMPAOLO DI PAOLA			GEN VINCENZO CAMPORINI	
POL President	LECH KACZYNSKI				BRONISLAW KOMOROWSKI
POL Min of Defence	RADOSLAW SIKORSKI	ALEKSANDER SZCZYGLÓ	BOGDAN KLICH		
POL CHOD	GEN FRANCISZEK GAGOR				GEN CIENIUCH

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	2011	2012	2013	2014
AFG President	HAMID KARZAI			ASHRAF GHANI
AFG Min of Defence	GEN ABDUL RAHIM WARDAK GEN SHER MOHAMMAD KARIMI	BISMILLAH KHAN MOHAMMADI		
AFG CHOD	ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN			JENS STOLTENBERG
NATO SECGEN				
NATO Snr Civ Rep	SIMON GASS	MAURITS JOCHEMS		
U.S. AMB TO AFG	KARL EIKENBERRY	RYAN CROCKER	JAMES CUNNINGHAM	
UK AMB TO AFG	MARK SEDWILL	WILLIAM PATEY	RICHARD STAGG	
CAN AMB TO AFG	WILLIAM CROSBY	SHELLEY WHITTING	GLENN DAVIDSON	DEBORAH LYONS
COMISAF	GEN PETRAEUS	GEN JOHN ALLEN	GEN JOSEPH DUNFORD	GEN JOHN CAMPBELL
ISAF Joint Comd	GEN RODRIGUEZ	GEN CURTIS SCAPAROTTI	GEN JAMES TERRY	GEN JOSEPH ANDERSON
Comd RC South	MGEN JAMES TERRY	MGEN JAMES HUGGINS	MGEN ROBERT ABRAMS	MGEN PAUL LACAMERA
Comd RC SouthWest	MGEN MILLS	MGEN JOHN TOOLAN	MGEN CHARLES GURGANUS	MGEN WALTER MILLER
NATO CMC	ADM GIAMPAOLO DI PAOLA	GEN KNUT BARTELS		BGEN VIET LUONG
SACEUR	ADM JAMES STAVRIDIS		GEN PHILIP BREEDLOVE	
U.S. President	BARACK OBAMA			
U.S. SecDef	ROBERT GATES	LEON PANETTA	CHUCK HAGEL	
U.S. CHOD	ADM MULLEN	GEN MARTIN DEMPSEY		
UK Prime Minister	DAVID CAMERON			
UK SecStateDef	LIAM FOX	PHILLIP HAMMOND		MICHAEL FALLON
UK CHOD	GEN SIR DAVID RICHARDS		GEN SIR NICK HOUGHTON	
CAN Prime Minister	STEPHEN HARPER			
CAN Min of Defence	PETER MACKAY		ROB NICHOLSON	
CAN CHOD	GEN WALT NATYNCZYK		GEN TOM LAWSON	
FRA President	NICOLAS SARKOZY	FRANCOIS HOLLANDE		
FRA MinDef	GERARD LONGUET	JEAN-YVES LE DRIAN		
FRA CHOD	ADM EDOUARD GUILLAUD			GEN PIERRE DE VILLIERS
GER Chancellor	ANGELA MERKEL			
GER Min of Defence	GUTTENBERG	THOMAS DE MAIZIERE		URSULA VON DER LEYEN
GER CHOD	GEN VOLKER WIEKER			
ITA Prime Minister	SILVIO BERLUSCONI	MARIO MONTI	ENRICO LETTA	MATTEO RENZI
ITA Min of Defence	IGNAZIO LA RUSSA	GIAMPAULO DI PAOLA	MARIO MAURO	ROBERTA PINOTTI
ITA CHOD	GEN BIAGIO ABRATE		ADM LUIGI MANTELLI	
POL President	BRONISLAW KOMOROWSKI			
POL Min of Defence	KLICH	TOMASZ SIEMONIAK		
POL CHOD	GEN MIECZYSLAW CIENIUCH		GEN MIECZYSLAW GOCUL	

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TABLE KEY

This Table provides a visual timeline overview of select key principals in office or assigned to NATO over the course of the Afghanistan campaign. It is meant to illustrate the degree and scale of change of personalities and thus, shows the potential for prospectively very different approaches to the mission, which significantly complicates the challenge associated with trying to maintain a ‘single coherent, consistent NATO narrative’ over the course of the campaign.

Colour coding:

The ‘NATO’ column in purple indicates positions that are not affiliated with a particular nationality: the individual serves as a representative of the Alliance, though in practice they are often publicly identified with their nationality. The position of SACEUR is unique in that by definition the appointment is reserved for Americans only. In addition to being the senior NATO operational officer (the senior NATO military officer is the Chairman of the Military Committee), the position is also head of all U.S. forces in Europe: this ‘dual-hatting’ means it is often difficult to parse whether public statements or actions represent the voice of ‘SACEUR as the NATO forces chief’ or ‘SACEUR as a very senior American commander’.

The rationale for including these seven of the 28 NATO members is:

- throughout the mission, the U.S., UK and GER were the largest, second-largest and third-largest contributors of forces respectively.
- The chart includes most of those who held regional command and thus those with the most substantive contribution in terms of ‘boots on the ground’, including the U.S. in RC (East); Germany in RC (North); Italy in RC (West); France in RC (Capital); and Canada in RC (South), along with the UK and the Netherlands, who had similar experiences as Canada in many respects. Poland was the largest regular contributor of forces among the ‘newest’ NATO members and so is included. Of note, Australia was the largest Partner nation contributor of forces for a significant period of time.

Observations

- The chart illustrates the dominance of a small number of nations in key positions of authority or command over the course of the NATO-led ISAF mission. Of interest, none of the ‘purple’ NATO positions throughout the ISAF campaign was held by a personality from any of the last 13 NATO nations to join the Alliance, going back to Spain in 1982.
- The longest serving officials on the list are Hamid Karzai, followed by Bismallah Khan Mohammadi (who was also interior minister for 2 1/2 years between Chief of Defence (CHOD) and Minister of Defence appointments), then German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with almost four years less time in office over that period than President Karzai.
- One personality appears three times (Giampaolo di Paola as Italian Chief of Defence, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, and as the Italian Minister of Defence).

CHAPTER 2: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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This chapter aggregates and expands on observations and Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF) comments and recommendations from various chapters in the report, arranged in eight sections: Overall Findings, Conduct of ISAF Communications at NATO HQ, Operational Execution at ISAF, NATO Strategic Level HQs, NATO StratCom Policy, NATO Communication and Information-Related Doctrine, Future Operations, and “ironies” from studying the mission. This is followed by recommendations, limited to the 12 most important.

OVERALL FINDINGS (OF)

OF1. Today’s information environment¹ bears little resemblance to what it was at the start of the ISAF mission in 2001, in large measure a result of widespread access to reliable Internet, the ubiquity of smart phones and the global scope and penetration of social media. In about a decade and a half we have transitioned from grasping the implications of the Strategic Corporal, to dealing with the operational consequences of the Strategic Tweet. The Alliance has grown from 16 to 28 NATO members and from a few loosely affiliated partners to 41 of them, many substantively committed. It is a new landscape with profound consequences for how the NATO Alliance conducts all its business, especially across the full spectrum of military operations. This transformation has occurred much faster than NATO HQs and member nations have been able to evolve their communications mindset, structures, capabilities and outputs. With the exception of the U.S. and UK there were no external shocks sufficiently compelling to make this happen.²

OF2. The 2003-2014 UN-mandated, NATO-led ISAF mission, most of which featured ground combat for the first time in the Alliance’s history, took a tremendous human and financial toll.

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1 Alas, we already encounter the first of many conundrums that illustrate the complexity of the issue at hand. The information environment, after all, is defined by NATO and some national doctrine as comprising "the information itself, the individuals, organisations and systems that receive, process and convey the information, and the cognitive, virtual and physical space in which this occurs" ... so then, *everything*. Influencing that in the precisely desired way is made fantastically more difficult if it is accepted that all actions, whether big or small, kinetic or otherwise, communicates something to somebody, somewhere: as does, doing nothing. [Military Committee Policy on NATO Information Operations 422/5, 22 Jan 15].

2 The 9/11 attacks and the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq invasion spurred dramatic changes in thinking and resourcing across the spectrum of communication and information-related capabilities in the U.S. They have had their discussions and debates about StratCom, and have settled on it as being a process of communicating strategically. This informs how their communication communities should work together, and they are now getting on with the business at hand, albeit armed with significant strengths in all communication capabilities. Admiral Mullen’s diagnosis (Mullen, 2009) that policies and execution problems are the key issue, is particularly insightful. In the UK, the collective experiences of operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and now against Daesh/ISIL have sparked a series of reflections and reforms across the full front of Government communications. It bears mentioning that amongst NATO members, the German military has significant communication capabilities and has adapted better than most, if not all of NATO members in this regard.

Regardless, ISAF served as a forcing function only for minor and incremental, albeit important, improvements in NATO communication and information-related policy, capability and capacity aggregated over more than a decade of continuous operations. The catalyst for the current effort to make substantive institutional reforms in this regard has been Russia's attack on Ukraine, and the decisions in response to that stemming from the 2014 Wales Summit.

OF3. Until the Riga Summit in November 2006, neither NATO HQ (consisting of the International Staff (IS) and the International Military Staff (IMS)) nor the two bi-Strategic Commands (Allied Command Operations and Allied Command Transformation) anticipated or adequately recognised the scale and scope of the effort and communications resources required to prosecute the ISAF communication and information campaign at the strategic level. The mission had been Alliance-led for three years by then, and many of the operational risks, threats, challenges and opportunities for the communication effort associated with expanding the mission throughout Afghanistan were known. In many respects, the NATO strategic-level communications effort started from scratch at this point. It was a profound collective failure of anticipatory planning.

OF4. The Afghanistan mission consumed considerable time, attention and effort at NATO HQ but was hardly the only operation or line of activity underway that drew the collective energies and resources of Secretaries General, Ambassadors, Military Representatives, NATO staff, and the various committees and working groups. Providing communications support to all other multiple and important lines of Alliance activity including operations as well as support to Executive Management exerted real pressure and constrained the choice of where and how to allocate limited resources.³ In an era of zero real growth and zero nominal growth (thus, downsizing) forced on it by nations, NATO HQ managed a considerably more effective ISAF communication effort than nations or critics often give it credit for.

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 3 Throughout the height of the NATO-led ISAF campaign, the operational tempo at NATO was unusually high. In addition to ISAF there was the modest-sized mission to train, mentor and equip Iraqi forces (NTM-I); assistance to victims of Hurricane Katrina in the U.S.; Pakistan earthquake relief; air logistics and training support to the African Union; a counter-piracy naval mission off the coast of Somalia (Allied Protector); the KFOR presence; the maritime surveillance mission to detect and deter terrorist activity in and around the Mediterranean (Active Endeavour); the 7-month Op Unified Protector (Libya) mission; and the Patriot missile deployment in Turkey. If one is generous and includes air support to major events including the Olympics in Greece and NATO Summits, then the number of distinct operations was 11. In addition, during that same period there were 5 NATO Summits (2006 Riga, 2008 Budapest, 2009 Strasbourg/Kehl, 2010 Lisbon, 2012 Chicago), along with the associated variety of Ministerial-level meetings.

OF5. Leaving aside issues of policy and operational execution, there were 10 main reasons why ISAF communications was a remarkably complicated effort:

69 nations: the Alliance is 28 NATO members and 41 partners, all with a stake of some sort in the ISAF mission.

51 nations: ISAF Troop Contributing Nations to the ISAF mission in total.⁴

9 distinct key target audience sets: NATO member nations; NATO partner nations, but particularly those that participated in ISAF including with sizeable forces like Australia; 3 different groups in theatre (Afghan Government, citizens including key leaders, and adversaries); regional actors (including Russia, Pakistan, India, and Iraq); other stakeholders in the defence and security field, including think-tanks; international agencies, bodies and NGOs (such as UN, World Bank and EU); and the continually changing ISAF internal audience.

6 NATO strategic and operational-level HQs: NATO HQ, Allied Command Operations, Allied Command Transformation, Joint Force Command Brunssum, ISAF, and ISAF Joint Command HQ.

5 main communication and information-related disciplines: Public Diplomacy, military Public Affairs, civilian Public Affairs, PSYOPS, Info Ops, and the coordinating function StratCom.⁵

4 different but related, and concurrent communication campaigns: NATO HQ to nations; ISAF HQ to Afghans; NATO nations to their own national audiences and to other NATO nations; insurgents.

3 communication components: each message requires a sender, a message, and a receiver, and three types of communication: strategic, operational and tactical levels.

2 missions: NATO ISAF and U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom simultaneously being conducted in the same operational space and in the case of the latter by several NATO members as well, as if Afghans or domestic NATO audiences could differentiate between them. This bifurcated command structure and the consequences of that on the ability to coordinate effort in theatre was the single most damaging aspect to NATO credibility in the entire campaign.

1 of many: ISAF was just one operation amongst many things underway at NATO (see Chapter 6).

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4 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_116345.htm?selectedLocale=en
Also, see Table 3: ISAF Force Structure: Selected Elements, 2002-2014.

5 Per the 2009 NATO Strategic Communications Policy.

And, at the same time as the fight was happening, the information environment transformed.

OF6. StratCom performance and capability assessment demonstrates that ISAF was a case of a fundamentally flawed political/command structure that was by its structural nature incapable of devising and directing a unified political-military campaign. Good operational outcomes makes it a whole lot easier to realise what leaders would agree is a successful communications effort. Better StratCom on its own does not erase the outcomes of bad policy and poor operational execution. In the end, StratCom wasn't nearly what it could have been, but was considerably better than it was given credit for. Where policy and operations were well connected and showed results, StratCom amplified that effect. Where policy and operations outcomes were weak, negative outcomes could be mitigated but not overcome.

OF7. The weakest link in the Alliance communication effort at strategic, operational and tactical levels was the profound lack of trained, expeditionary communication and information-related military capability in almost all NATO member nations (excepting the U.S., and perhaps Germany). This remains the case today, in spite of lessons observed from multiple operations, a changed information environment, and adversaries' communication and information campaigns that are increasingly sophisticated. For NATO to be more effective in this domain, nations need to change from a 'willing general service officer eager to learn on the job' model, to one that is firmly based on 'qualified and trained practitioners in each discipline at each rank level'. The first-order effect of the current situation is that national

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For NATO to be more effective in the communication domain, nations need to change from a 'willing general service officer eager to learn on the job' model, to one that is firmly based on 'qualified and trained practitioners in each discipline at each rank level'.

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and NATO communications efforts by definition are less successful than they would otherwise be. Much is made of the deleterious impact of multiple national narratives, and that cannot be denied. The main reason for not realising the communication and information outcomes in theatre or domestically that leaders desired was that far too often, enthusiastic amateurs were 'trying comms' for the first time, including many operators put in charge of the various functions.

Why many nations are not serious about changing this situation, and why NATO HQ and the Military Committee in particular have not taken more active measures before now is most puzzling. National capability is where NATO draws forces for both the Peacetime (static HQs during routine periods) and Crisis Establishment posts (for deployed HQs and to reinforce static HQs in times of need). A difficult staffing situation for nations is even more pronounced at NATO. A broader, deeper national baseline capability will help nations, and in turn help NATO.

OF8. Taking the long view, the ISAF communication and information campaign cannot have been a failure, but that is not the same as an outright ‘win’. The magnitude of collective effort for NATO nations over 2003-2014 was a considerable expression of Alliance will and stamina. From a political-military centre of gravity perspective of “maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance”, this points to a strategic success broadly speaking, even if the effort for ISAF and communication was disproportionately borne by the U.S.. Support for military forces in NATO nations has rarely been higher (for many reasons, to be sure). Polls by the respected Asia Foundation and NATO’s own figures show variable but consistently favourable results for how Afghans viewed the international intervention.⁶ Public opinion polls in troop contributing nations started high and declined when it was patently obvious by about 2008 that the mission was failing, but the figures trended better than the reality should have suggested, and political recriminations and public protests in member states were few.

CONDUCT OF ISAF COMMUNICATION AT NATO HQ (IC)

IC1. The single best NATO HQ communication investment was the Media Operations Centre (MOC), nested in Press and Media, reporting to the NATO Spokesperson. The MOC provided critical tactical, operational and strategic focus over many years to directly support the political-military mission Centre of Gravity, that being Alliance credibility and cohesion. With appropriate resourcing, it would continue to play the same key role coordinating and executing Alliance communications during “routine periods” as well. Investing in a Spokesperson’s office for the Senior Civilian Representative Office in Kabul, the establishment of NATO TV in the latter half of ISAF, and major enhancements to the NATO HQ Website also added to the effectiveness

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6 That said, the NATO figures of high popular support do not accord very well with actual desired behaviours including the frequency of attacks on NATO forces and the lack of support for counter-narcotics efforts, to name just two.

of the Alliance's overall communications efforts.⁷ The engagements and outreach program that coordinated administratively complex transatlantic opinion leader and media visits to theatre, sponsored groups to visit Brussels, and supported conferences in nations was an important investment that paid high dividends.

IC2. Successive Secretaries General made a sustained commitment to communicate the ISAF mission to a wide range of international audiences over more than a decade. The effort by communication practitioners in theatre was commendable, that is a fact. But, a large measure of whatever success one is prepared to admit is due mainly to a very small number of people: the staff (and a few long-term contractors) at NATO HQs, some of whom fought the communication battle almost from the beginning. They obtained a deep understanding of the operating environment. They built relationships in and outside of theatre with media, influencers and opinion shapers. They provided valuable continuity at political-military levels from Brussels and Kabul, and effected value-added liaison including messaging with national capitals. It was a focused effort if not richly resourced. They guided, shaped, cajoled and mentored practitioners, many having deployed to theatre with no background in communications. They had a NATO agenda, with NATO messaging.

IC3. There were almost as many national narratives as nations in the mission, but in many ways this was a natural outcome of the need and requirement for different countries to make a nation-specific case to their own publics as to why ISAF was a mission worth contributing to and sustaining. Regrettably though, nations also employed multiple narratives of their own – a reflection of leadership change or intra-state wrangling amongst contributing departments of defence, foreign affairs, development and others – about how to define why the forces and officials were in Afghanistan. A variety of coordination mechanisms actively employed by NATO HQ and Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE HQ) meant the NATO narrative was surprisingly consistent, if unduly broad to capture every nation's interests. Both those offices coordinated with forces in theatre *daily*, as well as weekly VTCs, and regular staff assistance visits.

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7 The posts of Senior Civilian Representative Spokesperson and Deputy were cut for budgetary reasons at the end of ISAF, a surprising decision given that the post-ISAF mission Resolute Support continues, and that information efforts to engage with Afghan leaders, institutions and civil society is at least as important now as it ever was. A temporary reprieve was found for one post, which prevented a situation of there being no NATO civilian Spokesperson in theatre during the transition from ISAF to Operation Resolute Support.

“

It can be fairly said that ample communications-related guidance was provided by NATO HQ and SHAPE to the chain of command and to troop contributing nations.

”

All the while though, there continued to be a palpable desire amongst senior leaders that somewhere a paper-based strategic narrative could be produced that would knit together the considerably divergent policies in play in theatre, and convince malign actors to stop what they were doing. The annual NATO Strategic Communications Framework, (notably though, only as of early 2010), developed with the active involvement of SHAPE StratCom, was the latest in a

series of products including ‘rolling briefs’ (guidance to assist in explaining the mission), media lines, regularly updated master messages and Ministerial/Summit-specific products, all of which were regularly distributed via the Media Operations Centre. As such, it can be fairly said that ample communications-related guidance was provided by NATO HQ and SHAPE to the chain of command and to troop contributing nations. This is a view shared less by practitioners in ISAF than at NATO HQ, but it is valid all the same. Annual conferences also served to share lessons learned and strengthened coordination within the NATO communications communities.

IC4. A NATO nation-focused communications campaign was always considered vital to the prosecution of the overall Alliance effort as reflected in the political-military Centre of Gravity, and the personal effort of consecutive Secretaries General, NATO Press and Media, and the two military Strategic Commands. NATO HQs have deeply experienced military and civilian policy and operations communities, valuable assets that could have been more effectively deployed in a busy information environment. Broadening the opportunity to encourage public outreach and engagement of more NATO voices throughout the ISAF mission would have helped shift focus from communicating ‘what just happened’, to a broader, deeper engagement effort providing additional context, perspective and understanding of the ISAF mission and what it was intending to achieve.

IC5. The over-classification of information including documentation and imagery was a serious constraint to timely and effective public communications. This is both a national, and a NATO shortcoming.

OPERATIONAL EXECUTION AT ISAF (OE)

OE1. NATO had two StratCom campaigns to fight. The first for the support of domestic audiences of the 51 troop contributing nations and to international audiences, was successful in the main. In the operational battle against the Taliban and for the contested population however, if success is measured against communication and information policy aims: “...create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries and potential adversaries” (Info Ops); “to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives” (PSYOPS); and “to inform, persuade, or influence audiences in support of NATO aims and objectives” (StratCom), then the reviews are decidedly more mixed, and by those measures, seriously deficient, if not a failure.⁸

That is not to ascribe those results to the work of the communication and information communities. There are many reasons for the sub-optimal outcomes including policy dysfunction, the lack of a comprehensive approach, and an over-reliance on kinetic approaches over influence operations. NATO was not nearly as successful in this part of the campaign for two reasons: it did not invest sufficiently up front to understand Afghan audiences (for instance, the Taliban were not one monolithic entity all bent on bringing harm to NATO nations), and it relied on an attitudinal programme (polling) with a principal focus on marketing and advertising techniques, when a social-science based behavioural approach to deduce motivations was needed – and then to have used those findings to inform policy choices. Each troop contributing nation understood its constituents reasonably well and the ISAF mission held. No nation understood Afghans and the mission suffered.

This was a function in large measure of the huge staff turn-over and a short-term outlook that often did not extend beyond a person or command’s particular tour. For instance, excepting the last quarter of 2014, Afghan President Karzai served throughout ISAF’s existence. During that period, there were 16 COMISAFs from 7 countries and 11 commanders of Regional Command (South), 17 including when that area was split in two. There were 4 Secretaries General; 5 SACEURs; and 9 U.S., 8 Canadian

8 Military Committee policies 422/5 (Info Ops), 402/2 (PSYOPS), and 0628 (StratCom, DRAFT)

“

Each troop contributing nation understood its constituents reasonably well and the ISAF mission held. No nation understood Afghans and the mission suffered.

”

and 5 British Ambassadors.⁹ When the NATO Senior Civilian Representative’s Spokesperson in Kabul left after three years in post, he had worked with three ambassadors, four commanders, three ISAF spokespersons, and five military heads of communication. His UN counterpart had changed three times.¹⁰ In contrast, since mid-2005, there have been just two NATO Spokespersons and one lead official at SHAPE driving

StratCom: over that same period there were at least 12 military heads of communication at ISAF HQs of which 2 were professional communicators. This, in a complex setting where ‘Time In’ is key to establishing relationships and thus understanding.

OE2. Security, or the lack thereof, was a major determinant for what did and what did not happen in Afghanistan. As such NATO’s credibility, as the lead for the *security assistance* force, rose or fell with the condition and state of security in the country. Outcomes such as the massive poppy harvest and security sector reform efforts like countering endemic Afghan corruption were not directly the remit of ISAF (though, corruption was fuelled in part by the manner and way that funds for operational support were disbursed for projects, and ISAF established its own well-respected joint anti-corruption task force),¹¹ but that filled the information space. As a result, almost every problem looked and sounded to be a NATO problem, causing considerable damage to NATO’s credibility. Over time, the organisation managed to recover this in part if not in large measure, the catalyst for this turn-around being the mission reset begun under General McChrystal’s command that was resourced and generally sustained through to the end of the mission.

9 For an overview, see Table 1: Timeline of Select Key Principals in the ISAF Campaign

10 Notes provided by Dominic Medley.

11 See Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *U.S. Anti-Corruption Efforts: A Strategic Plan and Mechanisms to Track Progress are Needed in Fighting Corruption in Afghanistan*, September 2013.

OE3. There is a real gap in doctrine for understanding the role and place for capacity building, including guidance on when NATO communication and information-related disciplines should ‘do’ the activity, when and how they can ‘enable’, and when and how they can ‘support’. NATO’s focus should continue to be about seeking effect, not credit. For instance, Afghanistan now has a very modern media sector, in part due to the efforts and encouragement of ISAF, NATO HQs and individual allies over the years. Afghan media are broadly supportive of the government because their business model and future depends on stability and security. Enabling independent media and building Afghan government capacity to communicate with their population creates space for favourable discourse. However, these key enabling activities did not form a major focus or line of activity for NATO until more than half-way through the mission.

OE4. Nations put priority on deploying communication and information staff to their own establishments in support of national efforts over NATO posts. This is understandable. All too often though, assets assigned to NATO put national effort ahead of NATO interests and priorities. This manifested itself in various ways including a considerable weight of effort afforded to national U.S. media relative to others. The mission was frequently criticised as having too strong an American voice. By virtue of the preponderance of deployed resources, the command structure make up, and the heavy weight of U.S. assets in the communications and information domain, particularly in senior communication positions from mid-2009, this much is true, since at that point as much as 90% of the communications budget that paid for the spike in capability was American.¹² While it is easy to criticise this situation, given the lack of deployed capability available throughout the rest of NATO it is assuredly the case that the communication campaign in theatre would have collapsed as of 2009-on without this investment.

OE5. NATO Peacetime and Crisis Establishments for communication and information-related capabilities do not reflect current reality or experience, as demonstrated repeatedly in ISAF and in deployed operations’ after action reports including the Kosovo Air Campaign, SFOR/IFOR, and Operation Unified Protector (the Libyan campaign).

NATO STRATEGIC-LEVEL HQS (SL)

SL1. Though the North Atlantic Council and other committees regularly talk about strategic communications, for more than a decade the practitioners in NATO have generally been left to their own devices to try to fix the attendant capability issues related to doctrine, processes and capability.

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12 Briefing by Rear-Admiral Greg Smith, ISAF Deputy Chief of Staff Communication, 2009-2011.

Many of the core issues are deeply rooted in national political history and experience, or by the specific nature of a consensus-based political-military Alliance. More than 8 years after the NATO StratCom Action Plan identified major capability shortcomings to be fixed, and more than 6 years after an overarching StratCom policy was agreed by the NAC, the same fundamental issues persist. In view of the massive effort that was ISAF, the challenges exposed by other complex contemporary operations and the changed information environment, this institutional inertia is hard to fathom. The senior-most political and military authorities have allowed this situation to exist for years, watching, hoping and anticipating that perhaps over time these issues would resolve themselves on their own. They will not. The onus for changing *this* narrative should rest with the political-military leadership at the North Atlantic Council and the Military Committee, not exclusively with practitioners.¹³

SL2. Recent Alliance and coalition operations as well as contemporary events provide ample evidence of the power and importance of communication activities (inform, influence and persuade) in conflict and during periods of tension. This is made more challenging in circumstances where no formal NATO operational order or plan exists. There should be no lack of incentive to do better, and powerful sentiments to this effect have been expressed as recently as at the 2014 Wales Summit.

While Public Diplomacy and media operations figured prominently in the work of NATO HQ, the fact is that within NATO, strategic communications was not a mindset that informed structure, resources, and processes during the ISAF campaign. Examples include:

Mindset. The NATO Strategic Concept, last updated in 2010, is a key framework document that “outlines NATO’s enduring purpose and nature and its fundamental security tasks. It also identifies the central features of the new security environment, specifies the elements of the Alliance’s approach to security and provides guidelines for the adaptation of its military forces.”¹⁴ This guiding policy document views the information environment as nothing more than an early warning device, a media monitoring service to anticipate crises, not as a defining statement of the need and requirement for more and better engagement (notwithstanding its title, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence*).

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13 An external and independent review of all NATO communications structures is currently underway, largely a result of the Russia/Ukraine crisis rather than ISAF, and can be expected to recommend changes.

14 Available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm. There is no hint in the Strategic Concept about the role, place or need to communicate strategically, only that, "NATO will continually monitor and analyse the international environment to anticipate crises and, where appropriate, take active steps to prevent them from becoming larger conflicts", para 22.

Nations are quick to complain about NATO's communications performance and impact, but not nearly so quick to call for discussion, resources, or to improve their own capability in related areas.

The existing NATO StratCom policy is weak. In its current form StratCom is viewed as an 'add-on' to the policy-making function, not an integral part from the beginning of a deliberate process that counts information effect as a key factor in formulating and deciding policy in the first place. As articulated, StratCom is a collection of related but separate functions that is expected to communicate policy decisions effectively and as coordinated and in as coherent a manner as possible, but not to shape the decision from the outset. In addition, there is no Military Committee policy (as of December 2015), no NATO military StratCom doctrine and the various existing military operations and communication and information-related policies are not harmonised.

Process. The day-to-day management of media issues and coordination by NATO Press and Media up and down the military chains of command was effective particularly in light of assigned resources and the overall operational tempo. However, mechanisms to effect greater synergy of effort over the long-term horizon beyond public diplomacy events and media engagements lacked depth of experience or has atrophied.¹⁵ This situation is made more pronounced because of capability shortfalls, particularly at the military strategic NATO HQs.

Capability. In late 2007, more than four years after assuming the lead of ISAF, the leader of the world's most powerful military Alliance in history was publicly lamenting it still could not get photos or video from theatre to support the communications effort.¹⁶ Resources at NATO HQs continue to be constrained by zero nominal growth. The reality is that it is easier to reach target audiences today than ever before, but it is more difficult to be 'heard' given the saturated information environment with many competing voices. New forms of engagement and two-way communication are needed. Understanding and trust is about a dialogue with audiences, not a one-way message broadcast. Being effective at that can be difficult but hardly impossible; it is also cheap compared to the alternatives such as all the associated costs and implications with an over-reliance on kinetic activities as an operational driver.

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15 The Committee on Public Diplomacy, for instance, tends to consist of junior members from national delegations. The Strategic Communications Policy Board has Terms of Reference with real promise and is meant to feature regular meetings of the Assistant Secretary Generals and senior representation from the IMS, but does not.

16 Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, "Public Diplomacy in NATO-led Operations," 8 October, 2007.

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At ISAF, the implementation of a StratCom mindset and the drive to create information effects was principally a bottom-up endeavour mainly from that HQ simply ‘getting on with it’ in response to the actual needs of real-time operations.

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SL3. At NATO military HQs, progress to develop capability in all relevant StratCom disciplines continues to build, driven mainly from the military elements of the Command Structure and the Force Structure (including in at least some of the graduated High Readiness HQs).¹⁷ Allied Command Operations has been the engine and principal driver of StratCom at NATO and the principal source of related policy drafts and ideas, initiatives and products. Allied

Command Transformation (ACT) has been an active co-lead, producing quality outputs particularly given assigned resources and in the absence of Military Committee StratCom policy. At ISAF, the implementation of a StratCom mindset and the drive to create information effects was principally a bottom-up endeavour mainly from that HQ simply ‘getting on with it’ in response to the actual needs of real-time operations, albeit uneven due to the frequent changes of COMISAF, the communications head and senior staff, and the varying levels of practitioner experience. The actions taken post-Wales Summit suggest a new-found willingness at NATO HQ to lead top-down capability reform efforts and the inculcation of a culture that puts information effect more central to the policy and decision-making process at the outset.

SL4. There has been a decade of incremental change within the communication and information-related communities at NATO strategic HQs, driven mainly but not exclusively by the ISAF campaign, and now with one year of deliberate focus since the Wales Summit. Consequently, NATO HQ now appears to be in an advantageous position relative to many NATO nations’ militaries in terms of thinking, preparing and organising their communications efforts to be more competitive in today’s information environment. The resident expertise borne from a permanent, operationally experienced civilian staff at NATO is a major contributing factor.

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 17 Of the nine Corps-level HQs accredited to NATO, the Allied Command Rapid Response HQ, the Rapid Deployable German-Netherlands Corps HQ, and EUROCORPS have done the most to model their staff structure to incorporate StratCom lessons learned, in large measure stemming from their tours in ISAF.

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The capability gap between NATO HQ with its focus on public diplomacy and media operations, and national militaries with a requirement for depth in all communications functions is widening.

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However, the capability gap between NATO HQ with its focus on public diplomacy and media operations, and national militaries with a requirement for depth in all communications functions is widening. Given that NATO draws its capability from national forces for operations, this is a worrisome trend.

SL5. With its many interpretations and guises, StratCom continues to divide and confuse many officials, decision makers and

practitioners in the communication and information community at NATO HQ and in member nations. Many NATO nations simply do not have the concept in their national doctrines or structures, and the model remains the source still of some angst at NATO and in nations. The situation is exacerbated by nations observing what has transpired at NATO HQ as it moved in fits and starts to establish and execute a policy, then pull back from its intent. This recalcitrance could be expected to be a constraint for some time yet to the broader acceptance of StratCom as a conceptual model in the wider NATO community.

SL6. Collectively, leadership needs to manage expectations about what StratCom can and what it can't achieve, and to be prepared to accept more risk in efforts to do better. Expecting to synthesise every action, word, signal and match that with all aspects of policy in an Alliance of 28 nations (and 41 partners) is simply not possible, especially when nations have very different narratives about military engagements, as was the case with ISAF. But, it can certainly be made better. Communications products and synchronisation of efforts on their own are not likely to suddenly cause malign actors to change behaviours – this is possible by bold decisions and real forces and capabilities. But communications can certainly have valuable second order effects, including convincing potential opposing forces to at least stay neutral, or to limit the number of recruits willing to carry out attacks on NATO forces.

In a related vein, NATO does not have to do *everything* in the information space, but can strive to do more to empower other friendly, moderate, neutral or even constructively critical voices, be it through enabling independent media, as it did in ISAF, or by helping give voice to stakeholder communities. It is, after all, about *seeking effect not credit*.

NATO STRATCOM POLICY (SCP)

SCP1. The North Atlantic Council-approved 2009 NATO StratCom policy was not a product of long discussion, debate or careful deliberation by the North Atlantic Council or the Military Committee but an expedient recourse by all parties under pressure at the time to be doing something. Its aim was to coordinate Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs activities better, not re-shape related functions to more directly influence and change behaviour or more seamlessly integrate ‘actions’ including kinetic means. Still, while it was not perfect it was an effort, and very likely its particular formulation and focus on better and more coordinated Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs is all the market could have borne at the time. Conversely, nations have not been forthcoming about what more, specifically, seems to be required from NATO in this regard. A deep lack of understanding still exists at NATO HQ and the Military Committee about what, precisely, seems to be the problem; what more is it that StratCom should be expected to achieve, and of the institutional investment it takes to build viable, sustainable, effective capabilities.

SCP2. In its current formulation, StratCom is viewed as an ‘add-on’ to the policy-making function, a collection of related but separate functions that is expected to communicate decisions effectively, and as coordinated and in as coherent a manner as possible, but is not considered to be a partner from the beginning of a deliberative process to shape NATO actions and policy.

SCP3. The policy assigns responsibility to the North Atlantic Council and the Secretary General to *direct* all civilian and military NATO StratCom activities, and to the Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy and the NATO Spokesperson for its *overall coordination*. This is an exceptionally broad remit. It conflates two quite separate but related sets of communications requirements, both of which need to be underpinned by North Atlantic Council decisions: the inform/educate element of communicating to member nations, partners and like-minded countries, and in-theatre inform/influence/persuade military-led operations including targeting with lethal and non-lethal means. There is considerable difference between Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs activities driven by the top political-military HQ, and the strategic, operational and tactical communication activities undertaken on deployed operations for impact.

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SCP4. The lack of formal NATO StratCom policy until the Fall of 2009 does not seem to have materially hurt the ISAF HQ effort per se: a more robust StratCom policy earlier in the campaign would not on its own have been sufficient to change the conditions in theatre that led to unsatisfactory operational outcomes. That is, the same policies, same operational execution (such as a bifurcated ISAF/OEF chain of command) and same paucity of trained,

deployable national capability but now armed with a StratCom policy, likely would not have substantively improved the communication effort. As of 2004, ISAF HQ was already experimenting with ways to synchronise its communications better. In 2006-07, the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) demonstrated what could be reasonably achieved with a real effort at influence-based operations. In 2008, Allied Command Operations had issued its first StratCom organisational directive. And by late 2009 through force of personality and major investments mainly by the U.S. in communications capability,¹⁸ COMISAF General McChrystal had established a structure, resources and mindset that proved to be a significant asset to communications from that point on. Arguably the real value of a robust NATO StratCom policy is less about NATO HQ and more about the effect it creates in the NATO military HQs and member militaries, particularly the cascading military policy and doctrine that shapes structure, training, and capability development in nations.

SCP5. In light of recent developments it is not obvious that the top priority needs to be to re-open the 2009 NATO StratCom policy. The Wales Summit and the Readiness Action Plan initiatives launched by the Secretary General demonstrate that when nations overtly express a will and desire for something,

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18 One of the initiatives was to create a Deputy Chief of Staff Communication position, headed by a 2-star professional communicator, who had experienced at U.S. Central Command and working for General Petraeus in Iraq. This period was both the genesis and high-point of StratCom in ISAF.

decisive action is possible.¹⁹ But translating that intent into actual practice will be seriously constrained in the event of dated NATO policy, no Military Committee policy, *and* no NATO doctrine, as is currently the case. Of the three, the greatest need is to proceed with a sense of urgency on an agreed version of a robust Military Committee StratCom policy.

NATO COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION-RELATED DOCTRINE (CIRD)

CIRD1. There is a lack of a solid, overarching military communication and information policy instrument, but a veritable confusion of doctrine, policy, directives and guidelines in NATO that is akin to ‘doctrinal fratricide’. The effects of this are felt most directly on deployed operations as no less than two dozen disciplines, each with their own doctrine compete for time, energy, visibility, and resources.²⁰ A Grand Unified Theory of communications that successfully integrates all of the elements to NATO’s collective satisfaction remains elusive. Many member states unduly rely on the Alliance for communications-related doctrine, policy, directives and guidance so if it is not sorted out in NATO, these nations adopt not only the doctrine but the challenges that come with it. The pace of change in the information environment has outstripped NATO’s ability to refine, develop and promulgate instruments that are integrated and mutually reinforcing. What occurs now is an endless series of independent, cascading revisions in each functional area as any one of the other policy instruments is modified. This methodology commits a small critical mass of practitioners at military HQs to a continuous cycle of reviewing, discussing, updating and re-writing material. This approach ensures none can ever be caught up and all are out of sync. The result is a very considerable amount of people resources spent ‘down and in’ (talking within the community), not ‘up and out’ (executing external communications).

CIRD2. The inherent challenges to achieving agreed, integrated NATO doctrine, policy, directives and guidelines, and to realising better communication and information effect outcomes in practice relate to:

- the question of whether StratCom is a process, mindset, capability or combination thereof (thereby indicating structure, reporting relationships and resources);

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19 The 2014 Wales Summit declared that NATO would "address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats ... [to] include enhancing strategic communications". The Readiness Action Plan led to a range of tasks across the International Staff at NATO HQ and within the two Strategic Commands that seek to address some key issues that have heretofore remained unresolved, in spite of or as a consequence of the 2009 StratCom policy. Notably, this work is being overseen by the deputy ambassadors at NATO rather than the considerably more junior Committee on Public Diplomacy, itself a notable statement of intent. Discussion of this initiative can be found in Chapter 5 of this report.

20 See Table 4, An Overview of Capabilities Associated with Info Ops and StratCom.

- the need to distinguish between two separate but related sets of communication activities: the ‘inform and educate’ Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs activities at NATO HQs directed toward NATO member nations and international audiences; and the ‘inform, influence and persuade’ activities that NATO military HQ undertake which, following political authority for operations, include actions that employ the full spectrum of communication and information capabilities such as defensive and offensive Info Ops, PSYOPS, military deception²¹, and Public Affairs (to name a few), all within a construct that counts kinetic actions as a targeting activity;
 - the paucity of robust national, expeditionary communication and information-related capabilities;
 - the four firewalls embedded within the communication and information community (Public Affairs/PSYOPS, Public Affairs/Info Ops, Political/Military, Foreign/Domestic audiences) need to be re-examined in light of globally connected audiences and the widespread availability of social media. It is critical that the credibility of NATO public information be maintained and even enhanced, but firewalls constrain the ability to coordinate and synchronise concurrent effort across all communication functions. Existing firewalls hurt, not help, Alliance credibility, and the lack of a policy/structural fix provides advantage to adversaries.
- * Target audiences can more easily be differentiated and communicated with than ever before, but the output of communications is now regularly visible to a global audience, not just to the desired target audience: PSYOPS products used in Afghanistan are available to national NATO member audiences. The difference is one of *intent* and firewalls do not recognise intent: they suggest a separation of effort is desirable and possible when it is neither. For instance, in NATO, PSYOPS relies on truthful, attributable information, which is the hallmark of its credibility. The Public Affairs/Info Ops firewall means that both functions may be unaware of the others’ activities and therefore can inadvertently communicate incorrect information or put at risk a planned operational activity.

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 21 Military deception is usually understood by non-military audiences to mean 'lying'. In reality, deception operations are actions to deliberately mislead adversary decision makers about friendly force intentions, strengths, and intended operations. This can lead adversaries to misallocate their own forces and cause them to do things that are advantageous to friendly forces. It can be as simple as varying patrol times or letting adversaries believe forces are somewhere when they are not. Coordination with Public Affairs and Info Ops is important to effective deception operations. Deception should be distinguished from telling mistruths.

Not being aware of what all communication functions are doing increases the likelihood of information fratricide. *The boundary should be between truth and mistruth, not between functions.* This is how Commanders from section-level through to COMISAF, responsible for it all, are still able to do the job yet still be perfectly at ease publicly discussing the mission or operations, without a loss of credibility for having access or being party to all the activities that may be taking place including those relating to deception.²²

- the role and place for Info Ops within NATO military HQs, given StratCom.
 - * Within NATO the current concept of Info Ops as a staff function that coordinates some of the same things that StratCom is meant to inform, integrate and synchronise, creates confusion and animosity. At issue is whether two such functions are required; and presuming this to still be the case, decide how to allocate work between them. Until this separation of responsibilities is resolved, the discontinuity will continue to hamper the realisation of StratCom objectives.²³

CIRD3. The draft Military Committee Policy 0628 (Strategic Communications) is now undergoing amendments based on nations' feedback. With this in train there is an expectation that the policy will come into force in 2016. A robust revision of the policy would initiate significant downstream changes to an estimated 18 operational and communication related Allied Joint Publications, Military Committee policies, Allied Command Operations Directives, as well as to Allied Command Training material, and thence to nations.

FUTURE OPERATIONS (FO)

FO1. The NATO StratCom in the Context of Hybrid Warfare initiative provides impressive top-down direction and guidance and the identification of a series of actions that if implemented would be a major upgrade to the Alliance's ability to compete in the new information environment.

FO2. NATO HQ and the Alliance of 28 member nations are only now demonstrably more capable (in terms of experience, capabilities, policy and processes) of dealing with a contemporary counter-insurgency after many years of effort.

.....
22 Even the most famous of modern-day military deception operations, the 'left hook strategy' of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, did not lead to substantive claims that General Norman Schwarzkopf had lied. He simply did not signal what he specifically intended to do.

23 See R5 (b) in Recommendations section.

The lack of updated policy, limited deployable capability in the various communication and information disciplines at each rank level, and constrained manpower resources at NATO strategic-level HQs suggests the organisation and nations are not currently well equipped to deal effectively with asymmetric or hybrid threats. The staff draw-down following ISAF means less inherent capacity to deal with multiple concurrent campaigns, possible during the time of ISAF because of a commitment to reasonable resource levels including at the Media Operations Centre. The ISAF experience suggests that mechanisms or inherent capacity do not exist in NATO HQs or nations to quickly scale up if needed.

FO3. There is a decided lack of national, expeditionary capability (excluding the U.S. and perhaps Germany) in all five disciplines of Public Diplomacy, civilian Public Affairs, military Public Affairs, Info Ops, PSYOPS and StratCom. Deployable support capabilities such as combat camera/visual imagery and social media appear to be very modest in most NATO nations, often only sufficient to support national imperatives (or, a major NATO exercise if given 12-18 months lead-time). The establishment of NATO TV has resulted in a *bona fide* strategic level capability that bears reinforcement.

FO4. There is no standing NATO Response Force-like element in the communications field that can be deployed on very short notice to provide strategic-level services such as communications capability development for indigenous forces (which would have been beneficial during ISAF for the Afghan government and its security forces); or to establish full-scale operational communications quickly (which would have been helpful during the earthquake relief effort in Pakistan, and certainly for Operation Unified Protector); or for major exercise support. The lack of national communication and information-related capability also does not bode well for the ability of almost all of the nine land-based High Readiness HQs, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), and the NATO Response Force (NRF) to conduct a successful communication campaign on short notice in an information environment ably contested by adversaries. The adequate staffing of the six NATO Force Integration Units with a StratCom capability is also a requirement.

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION-RELATED IRONIES EXPOSED BY THE ISAF MISSION (IE)

IE 1. ISAF was a massive operation. NATO forces have been operating continuously in Afghanistan for a period of time longer than World War 1, World War 2 and the Korean War combined, or for about one-fifth of the Alliance's existence. More than 1,000,000 military forces and contractors from NATO and partner nations served in theatre. Almost 3,500 NATO military lost their lives and tens of thousands were injured. The financial cost was more than \$1 trillion U.S. The mission was the catalyst for considerable military reform and transformation including the recapitalisation of many nations' military equipment...but only of modest change in the communications domain. Now, there is no operation, no (NATO) loss of life, and the winds of strategic communication reform are in NATO's sails.

IE 2. Nations reserve for themselves the right and responsibility to inform their own citizens about NATO. In most nations, they abrogated this, then called upon NATO to do much more to explain its purpose and activities, at Alliance expense.

IE 3. The NATO StratCom policy cites closing the 'say-do gap' as a main policy objective but is itself constrained by its own 'say-do gap' – the major difference between intent and aspiration as expressed in the policy, and the actual effort expended - particularly within the Military Committee and national militaries.

IE 4. The grouping of functions and capabilities meant to effect greater coordination and synchronisation of military effort are constrained by firewalls embedded within their respective policy and doctrine that make it more, not less difficult to coordinate their activities.

The NATO StratCom policy cites closing the 'say-do gap' as a main policy objective but is itself constrained by its own 'say-do gap' – the major difference between intent and aspiration as expressed in the policy, and the actual effort expended - particularly within the Military Committee and national militaries.

IE 5. The communications community is either poor at communicating about their own needs and requirements, or are the busiest of staff. Years of advocacy effort to fix doctrine, policy, and procedures have heretofore seemingly been able to convince leaders to invest more in capability and capacity, relative to kinetic capabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS (R)

R1. NATO needs trained and experienced communicators. As well, NATO should include expeditionary national military capability in all disciplines of StratCom as a requirement in the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), which is the means by which national capability requirements are identified, established, and tracked. Nations should take steps to professionalise communication and information-related capabilities in their military forces. This is very different from ‘train the staff’, but a call for nations to create professional career streams in one or more StratCom disciplines – *but as a minimum in public affairs* – in order to develop personnel who learn and practise operational communications as a craft and profession. Doing so would set a key condition for more successful communication outcomes from both national and NATO perspectives.

R2. All military communication and information-related doctrine and policy, guided by the overarching NATO StratCom Policy, must be revised at the same time to obtain a unified baseline that can stand for several years. This includes Allied Joint Publications (AJPs), Military Committee Policies, Allied Command Operations Directives, and the Bi-SC StratCom Handbook. Ideally, necessary revisions to NATO Capstone Doctrines (AJP 1, 3 and 5) would be updated jointly and currently with all other AJPs. The current method of revising discrete publications in isolation from other related documents creates disconnects between related policies, and often several year gaps in currency between one and the others. Revising all at the same time would offer considerable opportunity to reduce the number of relevant policies and instruments, enhancing the effectiveness of those that remain. A common custodian and a standing working group with representation from all communications disciplines is a better solution in the long term. In the short term, especially with a new MC StratCom Policy nearing completion, this could be achieved with a short-duration, full-time working group constituted for a defined period to produce all of the updated, integrated foundational texts and refinements required for Military Committee review and approval as an omnibus package. This would allow current and future NATO military practitioners to focus more on communicating and

would be a real catalyst for the expedited development of related NATO training needs and of doctrine change in NATO member and partner nations.

R3. NATO should invest to reinforce those areas of communication that were successful in ISAF. The requirement for these capabilities at NATO strategic HQs has not diminished as a result of the drawdown of forces in Afghanistan – in the current operating and information environments they have increased. Capabilities that worked during ISAF should be reinforced, not reduced. At NATO HQ this includes the Media Operations Centre, NATO TV, outreach and engagement activities, and any forward deployed capability during operations (such as the Senior Civilian Representative Spokesperson). At NATO military HQs, this includes enhanced StratCom coordination capability across disciplines at each level, and with both lower and higher HQs including NATO HQ.

R4. Appoint a widely respected and experienced former operational commander of at least three- or even four-star rank to lead a focused effort to drive the necessary change in military policy, military doctrine, structures, and communication and information-related capability reform – under the guidance of the Military Committee and its Chairman. Experience shows that resolving the myriad of issues that militates against more effective StratCom is beyond the ability of communication and information practitioners, excepting in small increments over long periods of time. Changing that situation should be an operations-driven imperative. This individual would support the Chairman of the Military Committee and nations through the Military Committee, the International Military Staff, Allied Command Operations and Allied Command Transformation, as well as being an independent mediator of sorts to the multitude of communication and information communities, thereby helping build national capability as well. The effort should include suggestions and action for review and change to policies whose outcomes directly affect communications including document classification and information release authority, especially at it relates to the intelligence community.

R5. The NATO StratCom Policy provides an *overarching political communications framework that is meant to guide all activity* whether it is within or outside the communication and information functions. Because some of the communications disciplines – the StratCom levers – exist only within the military and therefore are guided but not managed by NATO HQ, the itemisation of each within the NATO HQ StratCom definition of StratCom is oddly placed.

These military functions are not *directed* from NATO HQ as a daily management function but rather are *responsive to* the NATO HQ StratCom framework and coordinated through the military chain of command. The military-related aspects of communications need to be integrated within the NATO-led framework, ideally with a strengthened representation at NATO HQ from the three strategic level HQs within the establishment – so it is in actual practice an integrated political-military activity.

- **R5 (a). At military HQs nest the collection of functions and activities related to StratCom in one Deputy Chief of Staff-level grouping.** At theatre and Corps levels, and at strategic level NATO HQs (Bi-SCs), this would suggest being led by at least an OF-6 (Brigadier-General, or equivalent). On operations, a mechanism needs to be in place to ensure that this group is seamlessly integrated into the targeting coordination process.
- **R5 (b). Clarify the role and responsibilities for Info Ops in NATO military HQs in relation to StratCom.** Consider grouping all activities that rely on truthful, attributable public communications (PSYOPS, Public Affairs, CIMIC, Presence-Posture-Profile, and military Key Leader Engagement) under StratCom as the integrator. The technical support capabilities and other Info Ops constituents could be assigned and managed under the following staffs while being responsive to the overall StratCom synchronisation / integration / coordination effort as follows:
 - * **Information Security (INFOSEC) managed by G6/J6**
 - * **Operational Security (OPSEC) managed by G2/J2**
 - * **Electronic Warfare (EW) managed by G2/J2**
 - * **Military Deception (MilDec) managed by G5/J5 and G3/J3**
 - * **Cyber Ops managed at the strategic level**

R6. Strengthen the bond between operations and plans at the political-military level. This would require enhanced capability within the Public Diplomacy Division for the purposes of more effective coordination of StratCom across the spectrum of political-military activities, in an office that includes military representation from select, operationally experienced military communicators seconded from each of the International Military Staff, SHAPE, and Allied Command Transformation to act as liaison officers for purposes of more effective coordination of StratCom across the spectrum of political-military activities.



A CH-47F Chinook in Balkh province, 2013. Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

R7. Nations and NATO commit to examining their respective document and information classification system and information release procedures with a view to making it considerably easier for NATO to use information to prosecute the communication effort. This would provide a significant boost to the ability of practitioners to realise greater impact of effort. Obtaining imagery for instance, to realise strategic effect should be a routine matter of course, not an issue for resolution at the level of SecGen or SACEUR.²⁴

R8. Establish deeper, more mutually beneficial relationships with private industry and news media. There are many shapes and forms this can take including establishing a working group of senior practitioners from leading-edge industries to compare, contrast and critique NATO communication activities. Narrative and the ability to ‘story-tell and show’ is fundamental to effective communications. Many firms in different media (film, documentary, web, social media, TV, radio) including news organisations are exceptional at content development.

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 24 NATO Spokesperson Oana Lungescu points to an example of this, recalling in an interview that “...we have only been successful twice during all of 2014 to release imagery showing Russian troops in Ukraine.”

More effective interactions between NATO and select industry partners would be a major enhancement to Alliance messaging and in particular for much more effective PSYOPS activities – truthful outreach to inform, influence and persuade audiences in nations where NATO is operating.

R9. Consider the establishment of a European-based, Joint Communications Activation Team (JCAT) within the NATO Force Structure.²⁵ This unit would be a ‘Smart Defence’ initiative serving as a strategic-level asset to enable major communications-related activities requiring rapid response or surge capabilities. This would provide support in critical areas including to the NATO HQ Media Operations Centre during an emerging crisis; forward deployed capability building (examples include the NATO Training Mission in Iraq, ISAF, or for Ukrainian forces); a Target Audience Analysis capability; forward deployed support to NATO force commanders (absent in Pakistan relief, Ocean Shield counter-piracy, Unified Protector mission, and ISAF); and by providing initial publishing, printing, website hosting, social media support, and digital material (image, video, audio) storage and distribution services.²⁶

R10. Review, and as a priority update the mechanisms that draw on communication and information-related capability from NATO member and partner nations to support NATO HQs. There are two related pieces:

- NATO draws military forces from nations to fill posts on the Peacetime Establishment (PE) and Crisis Establishment (CE): neither of these currently bear any resemblance to actual routine or operational requirements as demonstrated from operations in the Balkans, Libya, and Afghanistan, during major exercises, or in situations not defined by an operational order but requiring an institutional effort (such as responding to ‘hybrid warfare’); and,
- NATO Crisis Response Measures (CRMs) as they relate to communication and information-related capabilities are seriously outdated and need to be revised.

R11. Consider and better understand the profound implications of the explosion of social media for national and NATO operations. Social media channels bring risk and challenge but also considerable opportunity for deployed NATO forces. The ease and speed by which communications in these channels can be created and distributed suggests careful reflection of how this can and should be used in a NATO context, particularly as it relates to the domains of StratCom, Public Affairs, Info Ops, and PSYOPS.

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25 A more detailed discussion of this concept is found at Chapter 8.1.

26 NATO TV offers the prospect for some interim operating capability in this area.

R12. Provide resources to enhance communications and outreach activities with audiences in the regions that NATO operates from or may be expected to operate from in the future, including the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Trust and relationships are built over time through understanding and ideally, face-to-face or ‘on scene’ engagement. An Alliance with global partners regularly engaged in operations outside its members’ borders should wish to do this far more actively than is now the case. Establishing the conditions for deeper understanding and engagement means considerably more than translating story features for the Web; it calls for a re-think about how best to inform audiences about the role and place of the Alliance. Since 1997, NATO has conducted operations directly assisting Muslim populations in 7 non-member countries (8 including NATO member Turkey) – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, the African Union missions in Darfur (Sudan) and Somalia, and Libya, as well as off the Horn of Africa – yet remarkably, there are no NATO information offices in the Middle East, Asia, or Africa.²⁷

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 27 Further, the United States is the Alliance's most populous and important partner with many internationally recognised think-tanks and importantly the United Nations, the main international organisation with which NATO works on operations. While acknowledging the U.S. State Department's role, this suggests a re-evaluation of NATO outreach efforts in the U.S. The mere presence of Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia, is not enough to take best advantage of important engagement opportunities with leading think-tanks or with the UN, where a very small NATO liaison office exists. Arguably, the Europe-based organisations of standing including the EU and major think-tanks are easily supported already from NATO HQ Brussels.

CHAPTER 3: REPORT STRUCTURE, AND THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM



Photo: NATO/ISAF

“The architecture was very complicated – NATO, ISAF, Regional Commands, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, Forward Operating Bases, Embassies, National Capitals, Special Forces, the list goes on and on. The number of moving parts often created enough noise to drown out our efforts to publicly communicate and left the door open to contradictory efforts and outcomes. This is unavoidable in an operation of such magnitude, but also put us at a clear disadvantage against an enemy not encumbered by structure, process or truth. If the footprint had been smaller, if the ambient noise lessened, perhaps we might have reached a few more eyes and ears. At times, it was the equivalent of trying to have a conversation with someone in the midst of a Formula One race.”¹

INTRODUCTION

This report seeks to describe the organisation and assess the effectiveness of the NATO-led communication and information campaign during the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan from 2003-2014. The study focus is on the communication and information-related capabilities of Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs and Psychological Operations, and the integrating staff function Information Operations, the four key elements at the heart of what has since 2009 been defined by NATO policy as strategic communications, or StratCom.² The observations, findings and assessments lead to implications about whether NATO StratCom is fit for purpose for future campaigns. Lessons learned and recommendations for change are proffered.

The explicit purpose of grouping these disciplines in such a manner, according to the overarching policy, is to “support Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims,” a pithy yet modest and perhaps not entirely satisfying aspiration by NATO political authorities. Such is the angst around StratCom that six years after the policy was approved, NATO military authorities have yet to issue stand-alone policy or begin to develop doctrine, let alone articulate their own agreed view on the matter though that work has now begun in earnest.³

Military StratCom aspires to understand the information environment so as to shape what to do, say, show and signal in order to inform, persuade or influence audiences to achieve desired information effects or behaviours in support of mission objectives.

1 Confidential interview with a senior foreign affairs official who served more than a year in ISAF.

2 NATO HQ StratCom Policy PO (2009) 0141, 29 Sep 2009. The NATO policy differentiates between ‘civilian public affairs’ (as in International Staff) at NATO HQ, and ‘military public affairs’, a distinction that is not found in national doctrines.

3 Following the 2014 Wales Summit, the two Strategic Commands (Allied Command Operations, and Allied Command Transformation) were tasked to develop a Military Committee Policy on StratCom. As of October 2015, a draft is with nations for consideration, through the Military Committee. Heretofore, guidance, but not agreed policy, in this domain has been provided by Allied Command Directive 95-2 (StratCom).

Whether NATO HQ aspires to quite the same is questionable – the aspiration too forward-leaning for the political level. If StratCom can ever be universally agreed in NATO nations to be a mindset, a process, a function, a set of functions, a grouping, a capability or a mix of these, doing it well will advance NATO’s interests, better inform member nations’ national audiences, and create “desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries and potential adversaries.”⁴

REPORT PURPOSE

This report was commissioned by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence with a wide remit to conduct its investigation, loosely grouped in five main categories as follows:

- the organisation of the communications effort: how did the various configurations of ISAF and ISAF Joint Command HQs differ over time under various commanders; which was the most effective and which can be recommended as ‘the optimum’ for deployed operations?
- the coordination of the communications effort: how did the process work from NATO HQ to nations, and thru ISAF, ISAF Joint Command, and down to the Regional Commands, and how effective was that?
- the integration of StratCom messaging into the NATO narrative and the degree of penetration in NATO nations: to what extent did the agreed messaging form the basis of NATO and national communication efforts?
- how effective were communications and information activities in NATO and the main NATO troop contributing nations?
- what does the ISAF experience suggest needs to be changed, in doctrine or policy, in order to realise better communication outcomes in future operations?

REPORT STRUCTURE

Chapter 2, as the reader now will be familiar, for ease of reference is an aggregation of key findings and recommendations from the report.

Chapter 3 establishes a foundation for understanding the operating and information environment that governed the ISAF mission, briefly explaining several key factors of note. It also sets out a number of questions to help understand the role and place of communications relative to those of policy choice and operational execution, both of which serve to condition the operating environment and the conduct of the communications campaign.

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4 Military Committee Policy for Information Operations 422/5 (January 2015).

That baseline acts as an introduction to Chapter 4, which examines how communications at ISAF HQ was organised over the course of each of the different commands in the NATO-led mission.

A short overview of strategic narrative is included, as is a chapter on PSYOPS. References to that capability are included in the various command-related chapters but it is also treated separately given that the findings do not lend themselves well to being attributed to any one period.

Chapter 5 is a treatment of extant doctrine in order to better understand and clarify what, exactly, we are meant to concern ourselves with measuring.

Chapter 6 walks through the evolution of NATO StratCom giving deeper insight into how and why events and activities took the course they did. This combination of operational foundation, doctrinal base and knowledge of how StratCom evolved at NATO sets appropriate conditions to conduct an assessment of performance.

StratCom is a term with many different forms and meanings, presenting challenges for establishing an assessment benchmark, since it could refer to:

- how it is defined in policy by NATO Headquarters
- the condition or state to which it aspires by NATO military authorities
- the reality on the ground during the ISAF mission
- by what major force contributors to NATO understand StratCom to be
- through a prism of it variously as a process, mindset, capability, function, or a grouping

Public opinion polling in domestic and foreign markets is often the main or only barometer of measurement of success of how a mission or campaign has been communicated.

This singular focus can rely heavily on examinations of national narrative or agent selection (who it is that governments and militaries choose to put in charge or in command, and why) as defining factors for the communications campaign.

In contrast, the Strategic Communications Activities and Performance Assessment in **Chapter 7** uses a model that examines 69 scored factors to try to deduce deeper insights on many of the various aspects that goes into influencing the communications campaign.

“

Military StratCom aspires to understand the information environment so as to shape what to do, say, show and signal in order to inform, persuade or influence audiences to achieve desired information effects or behaviours in support of mission objectives.

”

Chapter 8 is an epilogue of sorts, a general review of the future security environment and whether the characteristics of contemporary conflicts are any different from the ISAF experience and thereby suggest different recommendations for this report. That is, if in the foreseeable future NATO does not plan to deploy 130,000 primarily ground forces to fight a contested counter insurgency campaign in a foreign land thousands of kilometres from its NATO member boundaries, are we

sure that the ISAF lessons can and should be considered useful for the range of more likely operations the Alliance may commit to in the future?

Chapter 9, the conclusion, is a fictionalised brief to the North Atlantic Council of an ‘ideal’ StratCom approach compared with and contrasted to the ISAF experience.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM WE ARE TRYING TO FIX?

The Top Ten list identified in the Executive Summary⁵, if valid, should lead to certain conclusions about lessons learned and the way ahead. It would not be a stretch to find fault with various elements of the communications effort and leave it at that. Future reforms could then focus on a more integrated organisational structure for communication capabilities, more and better training, and the effort to craft one entirely consistent and compelling narrative.

Set against the backdrop of the Afghanistan campaign are two deep-rooted beliefs:

- NATO lost or at the very least did not win the communications war, and worse, lost to ‘people operating in caves’; and

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5 (1) NATO did not have a compelling, easily understood narrative; (2) The narrative was not consistent; (3) Commanders were ‘off message’; (4) Communication practitioners were not sufficiently skilled; (5) Communication capabilities were not organised effectively; (6) The Alliance did not get the good news out’; (7) NATO was too slow at responding to events; (8) Messages didn’t resonate with Afghan audiences; (9) Insurgents had more effective communication operations; and (10) Media only reported bad news.

- A more effective communication effort would have been instrumental to enhancing public support amongst domestic audiences of troop contributing nations, and would have made a considerable difference to influencing adverse behaviours thereby resulting in improved outcomes on the ground.

The argument generally unfolds like this: the lack of one, clear and compelling narrative about ‘why we were there’ confused NATO national publics. In stark contrast was the succinct and easily understood Taliban narrative,⁶ effectively executed in theatre. NATO senior officers were often ‘off message’, prone to straying outside their lane and saying ‘unhelpful things’, which were either inadvertent – proving their lack of astuteness in such affairs – or deliberately done to force a political hand to steer policy choices.⁷ President Karzai, particularly in his last term of office, created considerable dissonance with his increasingly strident comments about the international military forces, even including threats to join the Taliban. Practitioners were not trained or skilled enough. Lines were not coordinated. Public response to events in theatre was unduly slow, or at least slower than the adversary. Media were prone to self-aggrandisement, inevitably one-sided and focused on the negative not the positive, seeking controversy over ‘balance’. The international agencies did not help the NATO cause. Nations focused on their own media exposing gaps in the mission purpose with the NATO message. Public opinion polls, initially high, dropped to unsustainable levels due in no small measure to the lack of a consistent narrative and an effective communications strategy. All of these are provided as rationale for ‘losing the communication war.’

This formulation suggests only three ‘baskets’ of remedies are required relating to structure, capabilities and execution of activities. First is a better organisation of effort – a structural fix or some alternative way to organise the info-related disciplines and functions to affect greater synergy of effort and reduce information fratricide. Second – better trained public affairs staff, greater synchronisation, on-camera training and practice for commanders, a deeper sociology-based effort to inform PSYOPS, and more informed evaluation tools.

6 Through all message delivery means, the Taliban narrative consisted of six elements: (1) the Taliban’s victory in this cosmic conflict is inevitable and Afghanistan will soon be returned to their control; (2) Islam cannot be defeated; (3) The Taliban are national heroes and willing to sacrifice for Allah and country; (4) Afghans have a long and honourable history of defeating invading foreign infidels; (5) Foreign invaders and their Afghan puppet government are attempting to destroy Afghan religions and traditions; and (6) The Taliban will implement an Islamic regime that is inclusive and tolerant of all Afghans. [Program for Culture and Conflict Studies, “Narratives in Conflict: An Introduction to Taliban Stories and their Delivery Systems,” Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, September 2011.]

7 This has its expression most prominently in the mid- to late-2009 period, with the leak of General McChrystal’s assessment and the subsequent public statements of General McChrystal, General Petraeus and Admiral Mike Mullen, which were perceived to be a deliberate effort by the U.S. military to force President Obama to agree to the request for a substantial number of additional forces. See Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2011) and Gates, *Duty* (2014).

Finally and most importantly, is the articulation of a written narrative to knit the disparities all together and unite nations and publics behind a coherent effort.

But, what does ‘winning’ the communication effort even look like, and what are reasonable indicators to define success? Is “cohesion and solidarity of the Alliance” a specific measure of public opinion so that in spite of national support for the mission being in the 30 or 40th percentile, success is 50, or 60 per cent? And if so, what difference does the extra 10 or 20 points make, given that the mission support levels at ISAF’s lowest point did not lead to public protest and recriminations (such as that still being felt in the U.S. and the UK over the Iraq war). In terms of “support for the troops” as an indicator it seems to have topped out at as high as it could reasonably ascend in every NATO country.

A broadly supportive public including the tacit agreement to deploy forces and put them in harm’s way is the start-point for judging success. Close behind, surely, is changing behaviours in theatre in ways that most directly support operational goals. Is this best expressed in metrics such as the number and trend lines of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) planted or insurgent support amongst the population to decide if ISAF communications efforts have been successful?

To what do we ascribe failure or less-than-ideal outcomes such as Afghanistan being assessed as the fourth-most corrupt country (172nd of 175) in the world countries surveyed in 2014?⁸ Is the failure to induce massive numbers of recruits to the Afghanistan National Security Forces (or convince many more to stay) a result of a lack of sophisticated application of social science research to issues of recruiting and retention, or a function of bad radio ads and an ineffective billboard campaign? Presumably, it is something considerably deeper.

Divorcing communications from policy choice and operational execution and looking at it in isolation leads to false conclusions about the communications effort. That is, campaigns widely regarded as operational successes (including the Implementation Force [IFOR], Stabilisation Force [SFOR], and the Kosovo Force [KFOR] in the Balkans), are a function and mix of policy, operational execution and communications, in some unknown proportion. Conversely, in the case of less than optimal mission outcomes such as in ISAF, this must also presumably be a function of those same three elements – but in what proportion? To what extent can unsatisfactory results be attributed just to communications? To begin to try to answer this, the following four questions were put to policy and NATO experts.

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8 Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index <http://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview>. The only countries worse were Sudan and tied for last place, North Korea and Somalia.

1. What preferential outcomes would be realised if communication was optimised? If the various constraints to more effective communications outcomes are eliminated – the narrative is articulate and as conjoined as can be, all spokespersons are doing a great job, resources are not an issue anywhere, all the nations are prosecuting the communication campaign well, liaison networks are great – then ‘now what do we want or expect to happen?’

Is it higher national public support for the troops; more support for the mission back home (if so, what does that translate to, actually); a 10% drop in the world corruption index to 155th place? Thus, if StratCom as NATO defines it works brilliantly, what reasonably would we expect to change in a case like Afghanistan (or Iraq, or Russia)? Do we really expect that President Putin abandons claims on Crimea because NATO StratCom is particularly effective? Following is a view from a leading authority on StratCom:

“The best end-state is to get everything aligned. Good StratCom should be the partner of good strategy to make sure everything contributes toward your end states, and (equally importantly) that you avoid doing things that contribute to one end state at the expense of another (for example, where killing one extremist is done in such a way that it motivates three others to take his place) ... The questions to answer are what behaviour changes are required to achieve desired end states; which of these can be expected to be changed through inform, influence and persuade efforts; which by those efforts supported by kinetic capabilities; and which by kinetic with inform, influence and persuade efforts in support? And, then to know which of those behaviour changes are likely to be undermined by uncoordinated kinetic efforts pursuing other goals. Done right, at minimum, StratCom should help us avoid shooting ourselves in the foot in the information environment.”⁹

2. To what extent is it likely or reasonable to expect a common NATO narrative in any campaign, in a coalition with as many as 50 nations including all 28 NATO members and with almost as many partners as diverse as Tonga, the UAE, and South Korea? Here, a former NATO Military Representative:

“Beyond preserving a united front to the outside world it is structurally almost impossible for NATO to win any StratCom battles. This is not due to any organisational or doctrinal failure on the part of NATO staff, but is about the sum of 28 nations’ domestic party politics, history, culture, fears and aspirations for which an existential crisis becomes merely the vehicle. And of course NATO, having been in existence longer than many states have existed as democracies has its own organisational politics, history, culture, fears and aspirations. If the current crisis does not represent an existential threat and is just another expeditionary war of choice, then 28 different narratives have

*to be constructed for each nation to justify action/inaction, consequent expense, the opportunity cost of other lost operational activity which was previously “essential”, and above all the legitimacy (if not the legality) of the mission.”*¹⁰

3. If communications is as important as it is made out to be, why does it prove to be so difficult for nations to invest in it as a function within their own nations for national capability, let alone incremental funding for enhanced NATO capability at strategic HQs? And, here, a former Director of the International Military Staff:

*“This goes to the heart of how NATO works. Decisions are taken by consensus, which requires a lot of time and effort. By the time a decision is reached nobody has the energy left to tackle the details of an information campaign, which are prone to reveal again the wrinkles that were ironed-over during the consensus process. Here is a big difference between the information campaign and the military campaign: once the decision, at governments’ level, is taken to start a campaign, the military practically operates on its own, without referring back to the higher level except if circumstances change significantly. If there is a military setback, it will be more or less taken in stride. On the other hand, the info campaign is not detached, but intimately entangled with the political opinions and decisions. Any small mishap in the media campaign, any minor mistake, any media leak, and the disagreements that had been so painfully patched up go again to pieces, if only because public opinion at home will take sides, and governments are always watching that (elections are coming!).”*¹¹

4. What are the limits to the breath, expectation and role for StratCom: is the emphasis on it as a means to communicate strategically, or as an operational driver? Is the level of ambition for StratCom to be an integrating staff function focused on achieving better *communications* outcomes (“the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities” per the 2009 NATO policy), or is it meant to be a significant policy force to obtain better *operational* outcomes (“the integration of military communication capabilities and functions with other military activities”, per the draft proposed MC 0628 on StratCom): does it inform or drive operational planning, actions and decision making?

*“You mean putting information effect first, so an Op Order for our StratCom plans, not a StratCom plan for an Op Order? We’re a long ways away from that point. Can we just first work on developing some skilled practitioners who know about more than one stove-piped communications discipline?”*¹²

10 Vice-Admiral Anthony Dymock, UK Military Representative to NATO and the EU, 2006-2008.

11 Vice-Admiral Fernando del Pozo, Director International Military Staff, 2004-2007.

12 Discussion with a former senior member of the International Military Staff.

So, these initial forays set out challenges for defining some basic questions of a fundamental nature including what does success look like, how would we recognise it, and how do we define the boundaries of what StratCom is, and what it isn't?

From this short overview, it seems reasonable to conclude that the communication effort was not as resoundingly successful as desired.

Aside from issues of policy selection, doctrinal concerns with the communications functions or even the capability and capacity of the communication-related disciplines themselves, the ISAF communication effort was a challenge because of the many interconnecting parts of the Afghanistan mission, made harder for a number of reasons particular to that theatre.

REASONS WHY IT WAS COMPLICATED

Leaving aside issues of policy and operational execution, this was a remarkably complicated effort:

69 nations: the Alliance is 28 NATO members and 41 partners, all with a stake of some sort in the ISAF mission.

51 nations: ISAF Troop Contributing Nations to the ISAF mission in total.¹³

9 distinct key target audience sets: NATO member nations; NATO partner nations, but particularly those that participated in ISAF including with sizeable forces like Australia; 3 different groups in theatre (Afghan Government, citizens including key leaders, and adversaries); regional actors (including Russia, Pakistan, India, and Iraq); other stakeholders in the defence and security field, including think-tanks; international agencies, bodies and NGOs (such as UN, World Bank and EU); and the continually changing ISAF internal audience.

6 NATO strategic and operational-level HQs: NATO HQ, Allied Command Operations, Allied Command Transformation, Joint Force Command Brunssum, ISAF, and ISAF Joint Command HQ.

5 main communication and information-related disciplines: Public Diplomacy, military Public Affairs, civilian Public Affairs, PSYOPS, Info Ops, and the coordinating function StratCom.¹⁴

4 different but related, and concurrent communication campaigns: NATO HQ to nations; ISAF HQ to Afghans; NATO nations to their own national audiences and to other NATO nations; insurgents.

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13 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_116345.htm?selectedLocale=en

Also, see Figure 3: ISAF Force Structure: Selected Elements, 2002-2014.

14 Per the 2009 NATO Strategic Communications Policy.

3 communication components: each message requires a sender, a message, and a receiver, and three types of communication: strategic, operational and tactical levels.

2 missions: NATO ISAF and U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom simultaneously being conducted in the same operational space and in the case of the latter by several NATO members as well, as if Afghans or domestic NATO audiences could differentiate between them. This bifurcated command structure and the consequences of that on the ability to coordinate effort in theatre was the single most damaging aspect to NATO credibility in the entire campaign.

1 of many: ISAF was just one operation amongst many things underway at NATO (see **Chapter 5**).

And, at the same time as the fight was happening, the information environment transformed. Below, is a partial list of key developments since the NATO-led campaign began (statistics as of Oct 2015): At the same time that NATO was busy in ISAF, the information environment transformed. Below, is a partial list of key developments since the NATO-led campaign began (statistics as of October 2015):

Facebook launched	Feb 2004	Facebook claims 968M daily users ¹⁵
Google goes public	Aug 2004	3.5 billion searches a day ¹⁶
You Tube launched	Feb 2005	300 hours of video are uploaded every minute. Half the views ¹⁷ by 1 billion users are on mobile devices
Twitter launched	Mar 2006	Twitter users send 500M Tweets a day ¹⁸
Launch of iPhone/ SMS revolution	Jan 2007	By 2018, one-third of the world's population, or 2.56 billion people, are expected to own smart phones ¹⁹
Launch of WhatsApp	Nov 2009	30 billion messages a day by 1 billion users
Launch of Instagram	Oct 2010	Claims 400 million monthly active users, 80 million photos/day ²⁰
Launch of Snapchat	Sep 2011	Claims 100 million daily users, 5 billion photo views every day ²¹
Mobile phones in Afghanistan		(2004) 500,000 (2015) 23.4 million (51st in world)
Phone fixed lines in Afghanistan		(2004) 85,000 (2015) 100,000 (145th in world) ²²

15 <http://investor.fb.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=908022>

16 <http://www.internetlivestats.com/google-search-statistics/>

17 <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/en-GB/statistics.html>

18 <http://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/>

19 <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/2-Billion-Consumers-Worldwide-Smart-phones-by-2016/1011694>

20 <https://instagram.com/press/>

21 <https://www.snapchat.com/ads>

22 2004 data from http://www.trade.gov/static/afghanistan_telecom.pdf

2015 date from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

Those are astounding figures with profound implications for how Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs and PSYOPS are conducted, and how Info Ops and StratCom are meant to effect coordination of Alliance-wide communications during ‘routine’ and ‘operational’ periods. It is not just the information environment that changed but the operational environment as well. A comparison of the first and most recent of large-scale NATO ground force deployments illustrates this.

NATO in the Balkans (Dec 1996)	NATO at End-ISAF (Dec 2014)
16 nations, some partners (little commitment)	28 nations (19 members in 2002) 41 partners (many with real commitment)
No out-of- area operations	Major operations in Europe and 3 other continents
Western Europe/North America focus	Global focus
Adversaries had ineffective info campaigns (Hussein I, Hussein II, Milosevic, Gadhafi)	Adversaries have sophisticated info campaigns (Taliban, Russia, Daesh/ISIL)
Theatre is the heart of the info campaign	NATO strategic centre is crucial to the info campaign
Media is how info is distributed to ‘general public’	Media is but one of many channels to reach ‘general public’
No direct reach to intended message recipient	Direct communication with intended audiences possible
No means for feedback from intended audiences	Problem is one of how to manage volume of feedback
Little media interaction with mil forces on ops	Robust embedded media programs
‘Citizen journalists’ unlikely to report	Everyone in theatre has a potential to report
Social media = friendly journalists	Social media has tactical, operational and strategic applications
TV crew: 4 (reporter, camera, sound, producer)	TV/print/radio/Web: 1 person
Military imagery mainly by specialists in trade	All individuals in all deployed forces can obtain and send imagery

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It is not merely thinking about ‘how do we want to communicate this action or policy’, but rather an approach of ‘what will the actions we propose to take and the words used to explain that, communicate to those we want to influence?’: theorists as far back as Sun Tzu (“the acme of skill is to win without fighting”), knew that.

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Counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen calculated that a Vietnamese villager in 1966 would have had 10 sources of information available to him/ her, almost half under government control, with channels like Saigon radio and local officials. In contrast, the Afghan villager of 2006 had 25 (counting the Internet as one), of which just five were controlled by the government.¹ Most of the rest, including e-mail, satellite phone, and text messaging,

are independent but more easily exploited by insurgents than by the Afghan government. And it is on the level of influencing perceptions that these wars will be won or lost. Digital disrupts decisively. Internet and social media enable audiences world-wide to follow NATO activities from the political to the very tactical level in near real-time. This enables adversaries to message directly into living rooms without a media filter. These are fundamental changes that call for dramatically new approaches and structures with respect to *how* NATO communicates, and how NATO organises itself *to* communicate. These complexities are illustrated in Figure 1: Who Was ‘Doing Information Activities (Friendly Forces) in Afghanistan, Figure 2: The ISAF Strategic Communications Challenge, and Figure 3: The ‘Spaghetti Slide’²

WHY IT WAS HARD

The information environment transformed and the operational environment changed – both complicated the ISAF mission. And still leaving aside issues with respect to doctrine, capability or capacity of communication-related

1 Interview with George Packer, "Knowing the Enemy," The New Yorker, Dec. 18, 2006.

2 This slide was the subject of much mirth and discussion in media, including a front-page New York Times article and was lampooned on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. It was presented during a briefing in theatre with Secretary of Defense Gates and General McChrystal to illustrate the complexity of the campaign; McChrystal remarked, "When we understand that slide, we'll have won the war." Elisabeth Bumiller, "We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Power Point," The New York Times, April 27, 2010. (Except, it is a systems analysis chart, and is not Power Point).

capabilities, a variety of other factors also conspired to make the mission hard. The most important are summarised here and discussed throughout **Chapter 4**.

The Place Was Big and Remote. For the sake of comparison, the major NATO ground campaign previous to ISAF was the Kosovo Force (KFOR), begun in June 1999 to “maintain a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement”. It was a mission that gathered 50,000 NATO troops from 39 different NATO and non-NATO nations. Kosovo is a country of 11,000 km², just a little bigger than Lebanon or Cyprus, with four bordering countries (1 NATO member and 3 NATO partners). In contrast, Afghanistan – another land-locked country – at 652,000 km² is slightly larger than France, has some of the most challenging geography in the world for military operations, and is bordered by six countries including Pakistan, Iran and China. ISAF began with 5,000 soldiers and matched the numbers of forces deployed to KFOR in June 2008, almost five years after taking the ISAF lead.

Afghanistan Was Broken. Following three periods of war (anti-Soviet 1978-92) and civil war (post-Soviet 1992-96 and Taliban 1996-2001), the condition of the Afghan state when ISAF began was worse than the lowest expectations of the optimists. It was not until 2006 that the UNDP was even able to include the country on its Human Development Index where it was assessed as 181 of 182 countries, just ahead of Niger,³ at or near the bottom of virtually every measure. At the fall of the Taliban, it was estimated there was 60 kms of paved roads in the country (compared to 12,350 kms in March 2015), only 6% had access to reliable electricity (28% now), and life expectancy was 43 (64 now).⁴ In many respects the international community was starting from scratch. It seemed that there was ‘nowhere to go but up’. The lack of human capacity and experience in Afghan institutions and civil society might have been a sign that Government capacity building should have been an early, major feature of international effort.

Command and Control. The command and control of ISAF forces was to a large extent decentralised, individual nations ‘owning’ their own area of the battle-space, including the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. “This resulted in what were nationally-run campaigns and thence nationally-run communications campaigns, with guidance including for media embed programmes delivered by national capitals rather than ISAF Regional Commands or ISAF HQ.”

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3 United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report, 2009 (sic).

4 Statement by Resolute Support Commander General Campbell to Armed Services Committee, March 4, 2015. Retrieved at <http://www.rs.nato.int/article/transcripts/gen.-campbell-march-4-2015-statement-to-house-armed-services-committee.html>

recalled a knowledgeable NATO Public Diplomacy official.⁵ The single most damaging aspect was the situation that for years separated the ISAF and the U.S.-led OEF missions, and all levels of command in theatre regularly found themselves struggling to respond publicly to incidents in their ISAF area of operations that were the purview of OEF.

The Tyranny of Terminology. ISAF aims were variously described as ‘ending terrorism’, ‘establishing democracy’, ‘stabilisation’, ‘security’, and to ‘defeat’, ‘destroy’ or ‘degrade’ insurgent forces. It took considerable time to even figure out what to call the persons and groups against which NATO was taking up arms, an area where early Target Audience Analysis would have been of help. Characterisations included ‘cowardly’, and even ‘detestable murderers and scumbags’, a turn of phrase made famous in Canada by former COMISAF General Hillier.⁶ Guidance was provided to staff not to use certain terms in Info Ops efforts when discussing or describing the insurgency, including:

- Taliban (not an accurate description of the insurgency and offensive to Afghans when used by Westerners since it means ‘religious student’ and thus has legitimacy)
- Mujahedeen (a term used by insurgents to describe themselves)
- Jihad/Jihadi (‘struggle to do good’, not ‘holy warrior’ as commonly used in the West, its use conferring religious legitimacy)
- Movement (with its implications of political motives and aims)

In their place were suggested useful terms including ‘terrorist’, ‘enemy of peace’, ‘enemy of Afghanistan’, ‘criminal’ (where appropriate), and ‘insurgent’, the last reserved for international audiences not inside Afghanistan.⁷ Though, as Arturo Munoz explains, when the label of terrorist was applied to the Taliban:

“The efforts lost credibility because it appears that most Pashtun target audiences do not consider the Taliban to be international terrorists and do not accept the premise that the Taliban had anything to do with the attack on New York City on 9/11 (despite their alliance with al-Qaida). Moreover, as the war on terrorism continued in Afghanistan, long after most of al-Qaida had fled the country and abandoned its camps, this became less credible as a justification for a foreign occupation. Today, the viability of the war-on-terror theme is further diminished by the fact that there is more terrorism

5 Confidential interview.

6 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/gen-hillier-explains-the-afghan-mission/article1331108/>

7 From Info Ops guidance document shared with report author. Nonetheless, ‘insurgent’ and ‘Taliban’ are the two characterisations that appear most frequently in ISAF communications beginning from 2003.

in Afghanistan than ever before, with a continuing increase in Taliban suicide bombings and use of IEDs that kill and maim innocent civilians, paralleling the increase in U.S. troops and combat operations. The Taliban have a strong propaganda campaign arguing that this situation is the fault of the continuing occupation by infidel foreign troops and that, as soon as the foreigners leave, there will be peace. There is a stark war of ideas here: The United States says that it is in Afghanistan to suppress terrorism, whereas the terrorists say that the United States is the cause of terrorism.”⁸

Today the UN refers to the variety of malign actors as Anti-Government Elements. Establishing what to call a group or entity isn't immediately obvious, but is a key part of any narrative and communications campaign, the choice of selection holding massive symbolism. Another case in point is the ongoing discussion about whether to use IS (Islamic State), ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), or Daesh (an Arabic translation), or as the French Foreign Minister said, “I will be referring to them as the Daesh cutthroats.”⁹

The Enemy Gets a Vote. The Taliban's information operations campaign was based on intimidation and rooted firmly in oral tradition including sermons but also via night letters, poetry, SMS, radio broadcasts and DVDs.¹⁰ “They're essentially armed propaganda organisations,” says Kilcullen. “They switch between guerrilla activity and terrorist activity as they need to, in order to maintain the political momentum, and it's all about an information operation that generates the perception of an unstoppable, growing insurgency. If one side is willing to apply lethal force to bring the population to its side and the other side isn't, ultimately you're going to find yourself losing.”¹¹

NATO was 'sticky'. Just as it proved impossible to disassociate OEF from the NATO ISAF mission, each misstep or backward progress in security sector reform landed at NATO's feet. The security sector reform agenda for Afghanistan was launched in Spring 2002 at meetings in Geneva that established a program and a donor support scheme with five pillars. Each was led by a lead-donor nation: counter-narcotics (UK); military reform (U.S.); police reform (Germany); disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants (Japan); and judicial reform (Italy). While these were ostensibly national responsibilities within an overall international effort, the interconnectedness with security meant they

8 Munoz, A. U.S. Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001-2010, Rand Corporation, May 2012, p. 34.

9 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-vs-islamic-state-vs-isil-vs-daesh-what-do-the-different-names-mean-9750629.html>

10 Professor Thomas Johnson. Presentation, "How and Why Taliban Narratives are Psychologically Received," Naval Postgraduate School. Retrieved at <https://team.sainc.com/n2/Files/Thomas%20Johnson.pdf>

11 Packer, *Ibid*.

were all intricately woven into NATO's DNA – so every problem looked like a security problem and thence a military problem for NATO.

Whither the international community? The international community in Afghanistan neither enjoyed nor fostered a similar coherence of vision to that experienced in the NATO-led Bosnia and Kosovo missions.¹² The merits of the 'comprehensive approach' was a favourite speech standard, a powerful theory but a failure in practice. The dual nature of the counterinsurgency/counterterrorism military campaign reinforced a firmly held view by many actors across the spectrum of humanitarian and development communities to avoid being publicly affiliated with what was largely viewed as a U.S.-led war effort and that a 'firewall' between military and civilian activities was needed for their security and credibility. Keeping NATO militaries at arm's length meant an inability to coordinate at the strategic level. "Even the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) regularly refused to share a public platform with ISAF and worse, frequently messaged against us, and in a manner that conveyed the sense that NATO-led forces were just another warring faction," recalled a long-time NATO official and spokesperson.¹³

SUMMARY

The regular, frequent and consistent complaints about the communication effort suggests a view amongst critics that the capacity and capabilities to do better existed, but that organising the effort was wanting as was an inability to fashion one overarching narrative about why NATO forces were in AFG and what they were doing. Major Toby Jackman, an officer with the Allied Command Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC), explains the challenge well when he says: "If you can do what you say and say what you do effectively at the right time and place with the correct audience and stakeholder you will be able to exert influence which, if well-conceived should contribute significantly to your ends with the means that you have at your disposal at the tactical, operational and strategic levels. The key to achieving this is to develop a culture in which the doctrine of Joint Effects and Influence is intuitive so that effects based planning considers the wider rather than the purely immediate effects of activity and that all elements are correctly synchronised at all levels."¹⁴

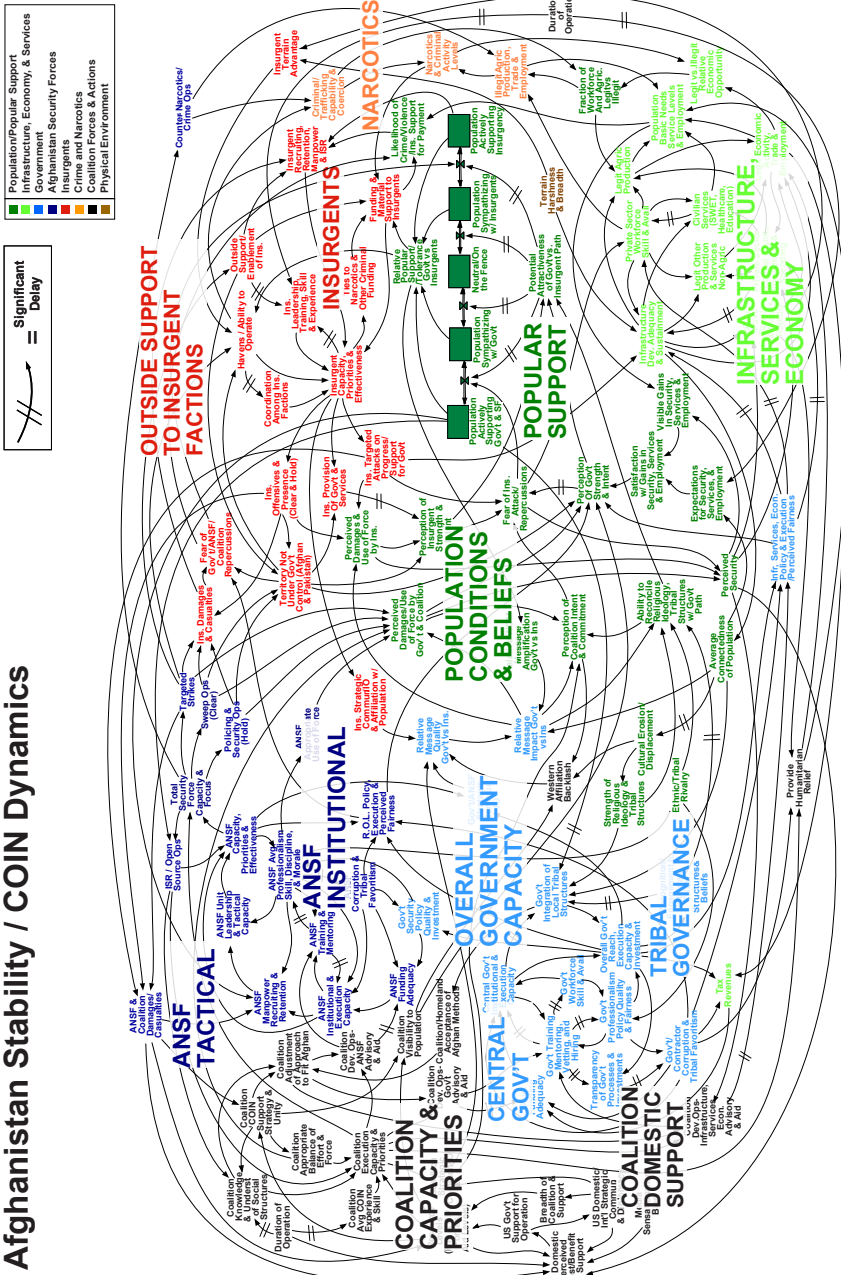
.....
12 In those missions, for instance, it was custom for the major international agencies to each be represented at news conferences, daily, for months at a time. It made for a long table often with five or more spokespersons representing a significant collection of organisations (Office of the High Representative, the NATO Implementation Force, UNHCR, International Police Task Force, and the UN), as well as being a venue for other agencies such as UNICEF and UNDP.

13 Confidential interview.

14 Interview.

Figure 3: The Challenge Of Communicating The Mission: The 'Spaghetti Slide'

Afghanistan Stability / COIN Dynamics



CHAPTER 4: HOW ISAF COMMUNICATIONS WAS ORGANISED



Photo: U.S. Department of Defence

“It was precisely the attempt to shoehorn the Afghan conflict into an instrumental model of war in which the aim is by default to render an enemy powerless that led us to treat all insurgents as part of one enemy who could be decisively defeated on the battlefield. That conceptual mistake ultimately expanded the insurgency, until we reversed out of it later in the campaign, and realised the Taliban were not a monolith and shouldn’t be fought as such. It is also this conceptual confusion that creates a false debate about why we “lost,” when Afghanistan is a conflict in which an unsatisfying outcome is probably as much as we could hope for — given how unrealistic the policy goals were. I don’t think there’s much more the military could have done given the foreign-policy context. The [counter-insurgency vs. counter-terrorism] debate is a red herring: it’s really a proxy for differences about foreign policy.”

Vygaudas Usackas¹

OVERVIEW

On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked and crashed four airplanes in the United States, killing almost 3,000 people. The next day, for the first time in its history, NATO invoked the Treaty’s Article 5 provision, “an attack against one or more of them shall be considered an attack against them all.” Less than a month later, U.S. and UK military forces were on the ground in Afghanistan to “disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime.”² The hastily configured coalition was operating with strong moral support from NATO – “Bin Laden has had his Pearl Harbor. We will have our Tokyo Bay. Make no mistake about it,” said Secretary General Robertson.³ Still, no direct NATO support for the in-theatre campaign was requested, an approach that avoided any potential protracted discussion or debate within the North Atlantic Council about how to prosecute the operation, but also served to put NATO on notice that American leaders did not sufficiently trust the Alliance to substantively contribute in a timely manner to operations other than those related to peace support or security assistance.

The Taliban’s role in sheltering Al-Qaeda was sufficient rationale for intervention and a UN mandate quickly followed. Even if nations thought that the “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” proclamation by U.S. President

1 European Union Special Representative to Afghanistan in a valedictory speech in Geneva where he reflected on his three years as Europe’s envoy in Kabul. “The European Union’s role in Afghanistan before and after 2014”, Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), July 10, 2013.

2 George W. Bush, “Presidential Address to the Nation,” Washington, D.C.: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, October 7, 2001.

3 Speech by George Robertson at the Atlantic Council of the United States, National Press Club, Washington, 10 October 2001.

Bush to a joint session of Congress nine days after 9-11 was too binary for their liking, there was a genuine desire that Afghanistan never again serve as a staging ground for the export of terrorism. Before the end of 2001, the United Nations had authorised an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mandated to support the Afghan Transitional Authority “in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, so that the Afghan Interim Authority as well as the personnel of the United Nations can operate in a secure environment.”⁴

“We are not into nation building; we are into justice,” said President Bush when asked about the U.S.’s long-term plans for Afghanistan.⁵ American Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was equally ill-at-ease and disinterested about the protracted and laborious business of nation-building, at least for U.S. forces.⁶ British General John McColl, first commander of ISAF, later a deputy commanding general in Iraq and also a Deputy SACEUR, characterised the American view on that as being “something that other people could do, other people probably being the Europeans, I should imagine.”⁷

In late 2002, NATO became directly involved in supporting the ISAF mission and by August 2003 NATO was leading it. Over time, a staged expansion of the NATO area of responsibility was deliberately planned and executed. The counter-clockwise expansion throughout the four geographic sectors reflected a concerted effort to move from areas of least to most degree of difficulty from a security perspective, first into the north (completed Oct 2004) and west (Sep 2005) then to the south (end July 2006) and the east (5 Oct 2006). This methodical approach was designed to afford NATO the planning and preparation time to fashion, train and deploy the increased number of forces required to conduct the expanded and increasingly complex and dangerous mission.

Over the course of 13 years and 16 ISAF commanders, the mission underwent a dizzying and seemingly unending series of changes and evolutions of strategy and structure as the conflict evolved. The following chapter is an examination of how the NATO-led ISAF HQs organised the constituent communication capabilities and conducted the information campaign, along the way identifying key take-aways or lessons observed. The work draws heavily from interviews and exchanges with information practitioners who served ‘at the coal-face’, senior personalities involved in mission planning, and others with direct knowledge of the events of the day.

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4 UNSCR 1386, December 2001.

5 See <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/26/world/nation-challenged-white-house-bush-steps-up-appeal-afghans-rid-their-country.html>

6 See Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, (2011).

7 Quoted in Sandy Gall, *War Against the Taliban: Why It All Went Wrong in Afghanistan*, (2012), p. 69.

The periods just before and during NATO meetings at the Defence and Foreign Ministerial levels and at Summits also offers a valuable source of material on-line, as do the NATO ISAF Spokesperson press briefings since 2003, where available on the NATO website.

Each of the NATO-led ISAF periods reviewed (and ISAF III, the precursor to the transfer of command to NATO) has three elements. First is a short overview of selected key events during the command period serving to situate the discussion. Second is a table of the major communications-related issues that drove the agenda of communication practitioners, as told by them. This includes issues external to ISAF HQ, and communications-related issues that were afoot within the senior headquarters. The table also includes an overview of the dominant media themes that were addressed by spokespersons at news conferences and drawn from a wide reading of (mainly) English-language media, as well as books, articles and reports by media, think tanks, practitioners and spokesperson transcripts. Third, is a description of each period with a view to understanding how the communication capabilities were organised, how the information campaign was conducted, and to the extent possible and where meaningful, what lessons can be identified.

The sections in this chapter vary considerably in length, in large measure a function of the importance of a particular command period to better understanding the evolution of ISAF communications and key developments in NATO StratCom. Four periods are treated more substantively. Lieutenant-General Götz Gliemeroth was the first NATO-led ISAF commander and thus any examination of how the effort evolved should begin here. As well, the commands of Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier (2004), General David Richards (2006-07) and General Stanley McChrystal (2009-10) were of particular importance from the perspective of StratCom-related developments.

As a preview though, some general insight about the composition of the leadership of the communications-related communities and how the various disciplines related to each other may be useful context.

Principal Comms Officials at NATO/ISAF Issues 2003-2014. A substantive effort throughout this research was made to reconstruct a record of key principal officials most directly associated with leading, directing and/or communicating the NATO ISAF mission over the course of the 2003-2014 campaign. This included tracking the positions titles to see how they evolved, and to confirm the names and nationalities of people that provided the key fills for the communications-related Crisis Establishment positions.

As it turns out, the best that could be achieved was to identify about 85 per cent of the positions and people. What can be drawn from that work with certainty though, is that:

- Five officers served at ISAF HQ as Deputy Chief of Staff Communication (mid-2009 to end-2014): all were American – one two-star and four one-star generals. Two of the five were career communications professionals (both Public Affairs Officers). In the entire campaign from 2003-2014, they were the only experienced practitioners (from mid-2009 - early 2012) to lead the ISAF communications function.
- Six officers served at ISAF HQ as Deputy Deputy Chief of Staff Communication (mid-2009 to end-2014): five were Canadian and one was American. None were communication practitioners.
- There were 17 officers from six nations who filled the position of Chief Public Affairs/Director Public Affairs at ISAF HQ over the course of the NATO-led campaign. Of these, Germany, France and Italy provided one each, Canada two, the UK four (of note, these were short tours), and the U.S. provided eight in a row from mid-2009. All excepting one from the U.S. and the four from UK were Public Affairs practitioners. At the ISAF Joint Command, there were six Chiefs of Public Affairs, all from the U.S. and all experienced Public Affairs Officers.
- There were 22 CJPOTF commanders, the first 18 being German, followed by 2 American officers and then 2 from Romania. The best evidence available is that all had a PSYOPS background.
- The number of ‘formal’ Spokespersons at ISAF HQ (let alone at the Regional Commands) can only be guessed at, since most commanders allowed a certain degree of flexibility around who could be identified by name as speaking on behalf of the organisation. Some command periods featured one main spokesperson and a secondary individual at ISAF HQ to assist when the primary was away. This was the case during commands like ISAF VI (Eurocorps: 2004-05). For others like ISAF IX (ARRC: 2006-07), there were at least five. In late 2007, ISAF HQ established a principal spokesperson at the one-star general level, and officers from Portugal, Canada (two) and Germany (four) filled that role in successive rotations until the end of 2014.
- Until mid-2008/09, about half of the senior Public Affairs capability at ISAF HQ came from Canada, with the remainder being mainly a mix of British and American officers, with Germany holding court on PSYOPS.

Excepting the NATO ISAF military Spokesperson, from mid-2009 a very significant proportion – as many as seven of 10 senior information-related jobs in StratCom, Info Ops, Public Affairs or PSYOPS – was filled by American officers. There were of course exceptions including two Spanish officers who served as Deputy Chief of Staff Communication at ISAF Joint Command HQ but these instances were few and far between.

- The naming conventions of groupings relating to PSYOPS and Public Affairs remained consistent over time. The activities related to the coordination of effort though, changed frequently and was variously called Theatre Information Coordination; Chief Joint Effects; Director StratCom and Strategic Effects; Director Influence and Outreach; Director StratCom Operations/Plans and Info Ops; and Director Info Ops and StratCom. Suffice to say, over the course of the mission but particularly from 2009-on, considerable change in titles and responsibilities occurred following the introduction of the NATO StratCom policy, the establishment of the Deputy Chief of Staff Communication position at ISAF HQ, and the creation of the ISAF Joint Command HQ along with the surge in communications personnel that accompanied it.
- Communicating the mission was a massive exercise. Counting troop contributing nations, this effort involved hundreds of offices and thousands of officials over the course of the ISAF campaign. Fewer than 20 positions directly connected to NATO though, were critical to the management and execution of the Alliance Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs effort throughout.⁸

The proportion of personnel who served in the various communication disciplines and who arrived in theatre with the requisite (or at least sufficient) training, education or experience can be deduced anecdotally but cannot be confirmed by the documentary record. Further, the qualifier “trained” can be misleading. A U.S. lieutenant-colonel public affairs officer is highly trained but to take that person from a tactical air force base in Biloxi, Mississippi, with a week’s notice and 10 days of work-up training with the NATO command HQ

8
 These included: at NATO HQ the Secretary General, Chairman of the Military Committee, Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, NATO Spokesperson, Media Operations Centre Manager, Senior Civilian Representative (SCR), SCR Spokesperson; at SHAPE HQ the SACEUR, Chief Public Affairs Officer, StratCom Advisor; at ISAF the COMISAF, ISAF Spokesperson, Deputy Chief of Staff Communication, Chief/Director Public Affairs, ISAF Joint Command Chief Public Affairs, and the Regional Commanders in RC(S) and RC (E). Joint Force Command Brunssum, while in the operational chain of command, was not a major factor in the public expression of the campaign, at least, not in the 'key' list.

before deploying to Kabul as the head of ISAF public affairs and spokesperson presents challenges all around. Stories of this nature were commonplace in all communication fields.

The view of practitioners from across the disciplines is that *in general*, several nations can produce a sufficiently ‘trained’ junior officer (OF-2, or captain) or non-commissioned member in Public Affairs or a related field. Considerably fewer countries are able to field qualified and well-rounded OF-3s (major or equivalent), and fewer still OF-4s (lieutenant-colonel). Three nations – the U.S., Germany and Canada – can with consistency produce qualified OF 5s (colonel or equivalent) in public affairs. Other nations have provided solid officers at senior ranks but this is by exception, not through planned, sequential progression throughout a career of that type of service. PSYOPS followed a similar pattern (see Chapter 4.17). Info Ops fared worse, and StratCom worse still.

By definition, national militaries that do not have a professional career stream in communications disciplines should not expect to have an abundance of skilled practitioners in those fields at the OF-4, OF-5, or OF-6 level, and even fewer available to post or attach to NATO’s Peacetime or Crisis Establishment. As Tony White, an experienced practitioner explains:

“It is not whether somebody after a half-day training can stand up and do a decent media interview. It is whether a nation can produce a captain who can manage a combat camera team to package and distribute information and imagery from the field in a timely manner and that is linked to commander’s intent. Can they then produce an experienced major with a decade of communications experience who can direct the full suite of media operations and advise battalion-level commanding officers in any of the communication disciplines, and manage a National Command Element or Regional Command-sized force? Can they then produce a seasoned and confident lieutenant-colonel who can think strategically and keep the Brigade or Division HQ on the right track with the right contacts to do effective reach-back so the commander is in sync with higher? Then, can they produce a colonel or even one general who is now an expert in political-military communication, with the requisite knowledge of all StratCom disciplines and who can deliver communication programs strategically at the highest levels of the Alliance? The function will not advance or progress until more nations accept it as a necessity and invest in it as such, creating professional, skilled capability and a larger pool from which to draw.”



Al-Qaeda propaganda poster found in Khost province, 2002.

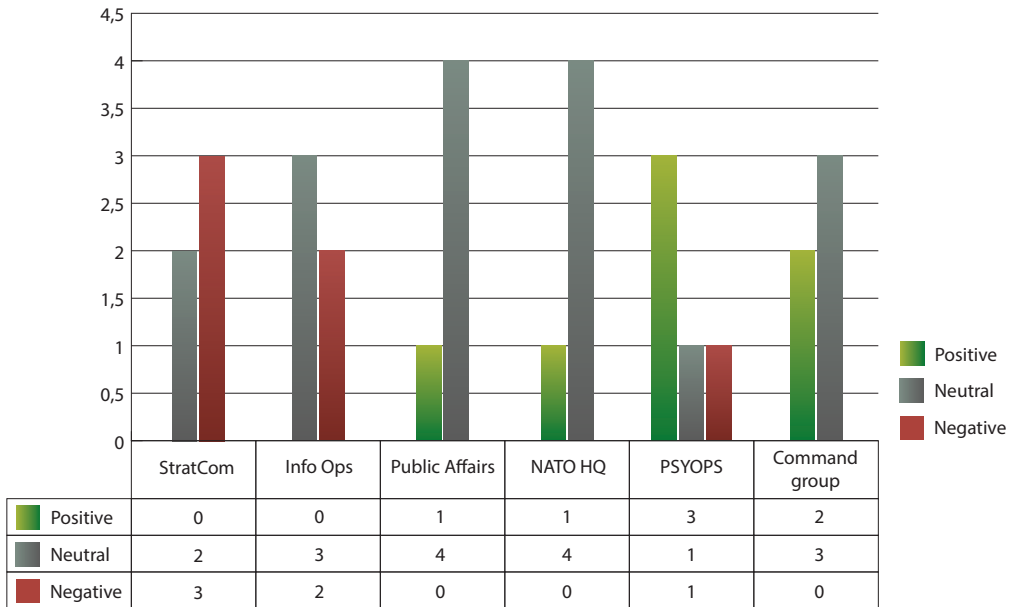
Photo: US Department of Defense

In short, remarkably few troop contributing nations figured prominently in the NATO communications effort, at least at ISAF HQ and ISAF Joint Command HQ, and particularly at senior ranks in Public Affairs, Info Ops and PSYOPS. At Regional Commands, lead nations provided the bulk of the communications personnel for each respective region with efforts directed at their national media, and often disconnected from the ISAF HQ effort. This is a frequent charge of practitioners when speaking of RC (East), particularly before 2010. The vast majority of ISAF HQ communications personnel were provided by just four countries – the U.S. far and away was the largest source, with the UK, Germany and Canada being substantive contributors. Romania provided significant PSYOPS assets in the latter part of the campaign, with Italy, Poland and the Netherlands among those making notable contributions at Regional Command levels.

What Communications and Information-Related Communities Thought of Each Other. Initial research including readings and interviews suggested that regular bouts of friction amongst communications and information-related communities were commonplace with a high degree of misunderstanding of each others' different roles. The literature also suggested commanders and staff were not necessarily clear on what some functions or capabilities brought to the table. For a group of related disciplines that have been closely associated for years, this was surprising and called for closer examination to better understand these dynamics.

During interviews and discussions over the course of the report research period, practitioners from each group were asked their views about the other groups. Table 2 at the end of this chapter shows the full results and Figure 4 displays a summary of findings.¹⁰ Among the six groupings (NATO HQ/Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, PSYOPS, Info Ops, StratCom and Command Group, it was StratCom that fared worst. That is, it was the least understood or was cause for most concern or angst amongst other communities. The reasons for this generally related to core disagreements about its role and place. Close behind was Info Ops. Much further back, and tied, was NATO HQ and Public Affairs: the reasons for issues that arose were often a function of personality rather than a real dispute over what that discipline should be doing. PSYOPS and the Command Group were the two communities whose function was best understood, and where issues that arise are generally caused by lack of capability or capacity.

Figure 4: Different Views of the World: What Information Communities Thought of Each Other During the ISAF Campaign



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 10 The sample size was approximately 40, and was supplemented where relevant, by a literature review.

CHAPTER 4.1

ISAF I

DECEMBER 2001 - JULY 2002

MAJOR-GENERAL JOHN MCCOLL, UNITED KINGDOM

“You will hear media presenters tell you that they are committed to obtaining an objective assessment of the news. Rubbish. Consider the BBC house in Kabul, where I was being interviewed by a young reporter whose assessment of the situation in Afghanistan was balanced and objective. But the message from the editor in London was ‘that’s not what I want – go and get me some news,’ that is, sensational, dramatic and attention grabbing. The media in general are, I regret, after air time, column inches and ultimately, audience figures. Against this background you have soldiers, each the master of his or her own destiny, interpreting the intent individually and perhaps through a couple of languages, capable of independent action and speech. Every missed step is captured, magnified and transmitted around the world. It is enough to make the blood of any commander run cold.”

General John McColl ¹¹

14 Nov 2001: UNSCR 1378 confirms that the UN will assume an important role in the country, and calls for establishment of a transitional administration.

5 December 2001: Bonn Conference.

20 December 2001: UNSCR 1386 authorises the establishment of an International Security Assistance Force including the deployment of a multinational force in and around Kabul to help stabilise the country and create the conditions for self-sustaining peace. ISAF I is established under the lead of the United Kingdom, with forces and assets from 18 other countries.

4 January 2002: ISAF tasks laid out in a Military Technical Agreement.

10-20 June 2002: A national Loya Jirga takes place and gives the Transitional Authority 18 months in which to hold a second national Loya Jirga to adopt a constitution and 24 months in which to hold national elections.

13 June 2002: Hamid Karzai is elected Head of the Afghan Transitional Authority.

20 June 2002: UNSCR 1413 extends the ISAF mission, noting Turkish command for ISAF II.

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 11 General John McColl, “Modern Campaigning: From a Practitioner’s Perspective,” from British Generals in Blair’s Wars, (2013), p. 115.



President George W. Bush (right) speaking to the press in 2003. Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

ISAF II

JULY 2002 - JANUARY 2003

MAJOR-GENERAL HILMI AKIN ZORLU, TURKEY

“It’s very clear from my position that ISAF forces must remain in and around Kabul at least two or three more years at least. Before that, if ISAF leaves the country, it may create some chaos in the capital and (put) ... the government in a difficult position.”

Major-General Zorlu, days from his departure as COMISAF¹²

17 October 2002: NATO approves a request from Germany and the Netherlands for NATO support in helping them to prepare to take over command of ISAF in early 2003.

27 November 2002: The Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) hosts a Force Generation conference for ISAF.

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12 <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/gen-zorlu-isaf-must-stay-in-kabul-two-or-three-years.aspx?pageID=438&n=gen.-zorlu-isaf-must-stay-in-kabul-two-or-three-years-2003-02-07>

CHAPTER 4.2

ISAF III

JANUARY 2003 - AUGUST 2003

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL NORBERT VAN HEYST, GERMANY

“We’re at a point [in Afghanistan] where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilisation and reconstruction activities.”

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld¹³

“The ISAF exit strategy? Getting troops in is my problem. Getting them out will be someone else’s.”

Attributed to SACEUR Jim Jones¹⁴

16 April 2003: The North Atlantic Council agrees to expand NATO’s support to ISAF.

June 2003: Deadliest attack on NATO forces to date as suicide bomber hits bus, killing an Afghan, four German soldiers and wounding 31 more.

June 2003: Pre-deployment theatre reconnaissance of first NATO troops sets off for Kabul.

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Security threat to forces	Transition to NATO command	Security threat to forces
Transition to NATO command	Being aware of, and managing, various national agendas	Possible expansion of mission
Expansion of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)	Guidance and direction from higher HQ in Potsdam, Germany	62 Spanish forces die in plane crash on return from mission
Security Sector Reform	Balancing nations’ desires for security of forces with ISAF need for proactive patrolling	March 2003: invasion of Iraq

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 13 Rumsfeld made the declaration on May 1, 2003 in a joint news conference in Kabul with President Karzai. This was a fateful day for theatrics: hours later, President Bush would declare on the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* that “in the Battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed.” He did not declare ‘mission accomplished’ that day in Iraq; instead, that message was written on a large banner with those words, in reference to the end of that ship’s deployment. A month later, though, while visiting U.S. troops in Qatar, he said, “America sent you on a mission to remove a grave threat and to liberate an oppressed people, and that mission has been accomplished.” http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2003-06-05-bush-qatar_x.htm

14 Confidential interview with senior officer at this meeting at SHAPE HQ.

Context. The British Corps HQ of ISAF I and the Turkish Corps HQ of ISAF II were widely perceived as having been effective for their periods of command. This was helped by narrow mission parameters, an improved security situation in and around the capital – a condition to which they significantly contributed – the scattering of Taliban and insurgent forces, and in the case of the Turkish Corps, a natural ability to understand and respect local customs, as well as a history of support to training Afghan military officers as far back as the 1920s and 1930s. Still, it was clear that sourcing, training, deploying and sustaining a division-level HQ and a brigade’s worth of forces every six months from a lead nation even if from a NATO country should be a temporary solution at best. Almost all of the deployed forces to this point came from NATO member and partner countries, a situation that was expected to continue indefinitely. Thus, a more resilient command structure was required, especially in view of a growing sense that Afghanistan could offer a prospectively enticing role for an Alliance keen to find a substantive role and meaningful operational mission in the post 9-11 security environment.

In addition, rhetoric concerning a possible invasion of Iraq had been building for months prompting outgoing COMISAF Major-General Zorlu to remark that any U.S. attack on Iraq would be seen by many Afghans as “an attack on the whole Muslim world,” and endanger Westerners in Kabul.¹⁵ In mid-March 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom began, setting in train a series of actions that would have devastating repercussions in the Middle East, and with major long-term consequences for the NATO mission in ISAF. By at least one experienced observer’s account a decade later, “Why did it all go wrong in Afghanistan can be summed up in one word: Iraq.”¹⁶

ISAF III marked the first time that NATO capabilities had been used to support the Corps-level deployment including for force generation support, planning, communications and intelligence.¹⁷ Interest in the Alliance becoming more involved was popular with the Karzai government, widely speculated on in media, actively pursued by the U.S., and by NATO itself. Wider NATO engagement would serve three interests: to see that Afghanistan did not once again become a base for terrorist activity; as a source of forces for reconstruction and development that were not from the American military, allowing them to focus on the Iraq campaign; and to foster a *bona fide* challenging new mission for NATO and

15 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/2744121.stm

16 Gall (2012), p. 341.

17 “NATO to Support ISAF 3,” *NATO Update*, November 27, 2002.

thereby serve as a means to spark Alliance transformation.¹⁸ Later, it also gave an ‘out’ to nations who did not want to become more involved militarily in Iraq but still could be credited by the U.S. as having contributed to the fight against terrorism. More substantive Alliance engagement would first require a new UN Security Council resolution and agreement by the North Atlantic Council, both of which were secured without issue. Nations were careful to expressly exclude NATO from any direct responsibility for counter-terrorism, this being left to the purview of the United States Central Command’s Operation Enduring Freedom - Afghanistan (widely known as OEF).

With the Taliban ousted, an interim Afghan administration in place, relative security in the capital and Iraq dominating media airwaves, Afghanistan was not top-of-mind for the international community or media. Germany was the exception given its command of the mission, its particular sensitivity to expeditionary military deployments, and to casualties. Germany had lost 10 soldiers by the start of ISAF III, at that point the most by any nation in ISAF, though none were attributed to hostile activities (of note, in December 2002, seven were killed at one time in a helicopter crash).

Organisation. The information effort was a fairly standard arrangement for the time period with Public Affairs reporting direct to the Commander and a German PSYOPS unit at the brigade HQ. Direction and guidance to the German-Netherlands Corps was provided by the *Bundeswehr Einsatzkommando* headquartered in Potsdam, Germany. At this early stage of the mission, and absent an overarching NATO command and control capability, there was little real hope at integrating the various national information efforts into a coherent whole. Two officers from that tour recall there being little explicit coordination of an overall communication campaign. Each nation was essentially ‘doing their own thing’ though with a loose effort at broad, general coordination amongst the Public Affairs community.

“It was all quite informal,” recalled a senior Public Affairs Officer (PAO) attached to a large national contingent.” The lead PAOs met occasionally to share information about what we were doing, along with any major issues, senior VIP visits, or events of significance. I had very limited visibility on ISAF and what it was doing from a coalition perspective ... I didn’t receive any direction, guidance or strategic messages, apart from a few requests to share information and to justify our media embedding program.”¹⁹

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 18 Lieutenant-General Karl Eikenberry, one of the OEF commanders and later U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, in testimony to Congress in February 2007, said the mission could either make or break the Alliance. "The long view of the Afghanistan campaign is that it is a means to continue the transformation of the alliance.!"... <http://www.ipsnews.net/2011/01/how-afghanistan-became-a-war-for-nato/>

19 Personal communication.

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Obtaining information in a timely fashion to quickly respond to events was difficult, and some countries simply did not allow soldiers to have contact with journalists without prior consent from the highest levels of their country.

”

Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Kolken, the main spokesperson for this tour and now a veteran of three tours in Afghanistan, actively responded to media queries including attending a joint weekly news conference on Sunday mornings at the UNAMA compound. The separation of OEF and ISAF missions was not yet a factor affecting NATO credibility given that its operating area was restricted to Kabul and the immediate environs. Media

interest was limited and unless a security event occurred, was nationally focused.

Kolken recalls a multiplicity of national public affairs efforts and a wide variety of experience and capability amongst nations dealing with media. In addition, there was a limited appreciation and understanding at the time within the forces and the command about how insurgent information efforts were able to claim the information space, and how this could be tackled coherently with so many nations working independently. Obtaining information in a timely fashion to quickly respond to events was difficult, and “some countries simply did not allow soldiers to have contact with journalists without prior consent from the highest levels of their country,” thereby reducing the opportunity for a more international flavour to media coverage.

Info Ops existed doctrinally but was not an effective coordinating capability at the Corps HQ. The PSYOPS unit, it was recalled, ‘essentially did its own thing’ with a general unwillingness to solicit advice within ISAF on products, or even to regularly share print and electronic products with others in the HQ. One officer from that period lamented that the effort gave the impression that it was “solely to inform German politicians.”²⁰ It would not be the last time the various information-related capabilities would be characterised as having a national focus of effort, inevitably affecting the coordination and overall quality and effect of its products and outputs.

CHAPTER 4.3

ISAF IV

AUGUST 2003 - FEBRUARY 2004

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL GÖTZ GLIEMEROTH, GERMANY

“Our first, and immediate priority is to get Afghanistan right. We cannot afford to fail... If the political process fails, that country will become, once again, a haven for the terrorists who threaten us, for the drugs that end up on our streets. There is another problem as well. If we fail in Afghanistan – if we do not meet our commitments to the people of that country to help them build a better future – then who will have confidence in us again? Our credibility – as NATO, as the Euro-Atlantic community – is on the line. And credibility is one of our strongest assets. To preserve it, we have no choice but to succeed.”

Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer²¹

11 August 2003: NATO takes over command and coordination of ISAF.

13 October 2003: The UN Security Council authorises expansion of ISAF’s operations to include operations anywhere in Afghanistan.

19 November 2003: NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan appointed.

19 December 2003: NATO decides to expand the role of ISAF IV.

31 December 2003: NATO assumes command of the Kunduz PRT, previously led by Germany.

4 January 2004: Adoption of a new constitution by the Loya Jirga.

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Evolution of the partnership with UN, NATO Senior Civilian Representative, Non-Govt Organisations	Settling in as a new NATO HQ, including interpreting ‘security assistance’ and managing expectations ‘up’ to senior HQs	NATO efforts in general and the prospect for broader engagement in the country
Establishing relationship with OEF and deconflicting activities	Evolution of the mission including planning early on for a broader mission expansion than anticipated on deployment	Equipment not suited to threat or environment
Disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration/cantonment of heavy weapons	Education of senior military and political HQs about scope and complexity of mission	Threat to ISAF and casualties
Security for Loya Jirga and prep for elections originally scheduled for June 2004		

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 21 Speech during first visit to the United States as Secretary General to the National Defense University, Washington, D.C., January 29, 2004.

Context. This tour was identified as ISAF IV but was the first NATO-led iteration of the mission and marked the start of an increasingly robust effort by the Alliance that would grow mainly in increments and peak almost eight years later in June 2011.²² National- and bi-nationally-led ISAF HQs had understandably not been eager to push the operational envelope. Minimal initiative and minimal risk was the order of the day, a *modus operandi* helped by patrolling a limited area of operations that was relatively benign, albeit insecure. The mood around this time was upbeat. As of the transfer of authority in August 2003, 32 nations were contributing 5,537 personnel to the ISAF mission²³ and the last rocket attack in Kabul had been four months previous. Reflecting on the security situation, UN Special Representative in Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi was of the view that “the situation is not bad, that these security problems we are facing are not threatening the end of the peace process or anything like that.”²⁴

The area of responsibility remained Kabul and its immediate environs, about 40 kms east to west, and 65 kms north to south. The scene was being set though, for a broader engagement in the country with NATO eager to use Afghanistan as a forcing agent for transformation and to secure its place in the new world (dis)order.²⁵ President Karzai certainly was encouraging a broader remit: “The reputation of ISAF in Afghanistan is so great that when the members of the constitutional commission went around the country to talk about the constitution with the people outside of Kabul, they were first asked if they could also have ISAF in their provinces,” he said at the change of command ceremony.²⁶

Eager to demonstrate to Afghan and international audiences that the transition to NATO lead was meant to be a continuation of the initial undertaking, “Same name, same banner, same mission,” was how NATO explained the change. This offered the comfort and ultimately the value of a placebo to Afghans and nations and was one that all were willing to swallow, especially in light of the post-Iraq invasion realities setting in with nations also contributing to that effort.

22 The ISAF 'placemat' of troop contributing nation contributions lists July 2011, near the end of General Petraeus' time as COMISAF, as the period with the highest number of NATO forces in theatre: 132,457, of which 90,000 were American.

23 The four largest contributors were Canada (1,900); Germany (1,500); France (548); and the UK (267). The U.S. contribution to ISAF at the time was 110, with the U.S. Coalition at about 12,000.

24 Retrieved at <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2003/s030723a.htm>

25 General Sir Jack Deverell, ISAF's operational commander at AF North HQ, was among many similarly expressing the idea that this was “a milestone in NATO's development representing a real break from the NATO of the past to an Alliance which is more relevant and has greater utility in the uncertain security environment of the future.” <http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2003/08-august/e0811a.htm>

26 Retrieved at <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2003/s030811c.htm>

With the Iraqi Freedom mission underway and NATO now in the lead in Afghanistan, fundamental changes were afoot in the operating environment for NATO with concomitant implications on Alliance perceptions and thus its strategic communications effort.

The ‘why we are there’ rationale remained consistent for NATO spokespersons and senior deployed officers. Major-General Andrew Leslie, Deputy COMISAF for ISAF IV, noted in a newsmagazine interview that forces were in Afghanistan for three reasons: national security first and foremost – “to stop terrorists from operating and training in this area and neutralise their ability to recruit new, young terrorists who could harm us”; geo-politics – “the epicentre of international terrorism is within a thousand kilometres of Kabul ... centred on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border area ... [and a] resurgence of Islamic extremists, such as the Taliban could very well lead to a destabilised Pakistan”; and humanitarian – “because the Afghans need us. We [Canada] are a blessed nation ... so we should do all we can to help them.”²⁷

At the ISAF assumption of command ceremony and thereafter, senior officials expressed high hopes and expectations about what NATO could do, these broadly stated goals falling short of what the NATO operational plan established as an end state.²⁸ According to Deputy Secretary General Alessandro Rizzo, “The Alliance is taking on this mission for one simple reason: to ensure that ISAF has the support and the capability it needs to help Afghanistan achieve the peace and security this country deserves.”²⁹ Peter Struck, the German defence minister, expressed the mission in a similar fashion: “to enable the people of Afghanistan to live in freedom and determine their own future.”³⁰

The experience of the successful NATO peace-support operations in the Balkans including Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo were top-of-mind when anticipating the type of effort that would be required: “NATO has long experience in leading and sustaining peace-support operations, and that experience will be brought to bear here in Afghanistan,” said Rizzo, “in full respect of the cultural and political situations in these areas.”³¹ The focus, then, was on *security*, and *assistance* broadly speaking, not counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, nor direct capacity building, and definitely not nation building.

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27 Interview in *FrontLine Defence* magazine, Issue 4, 2004.

28 "A self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government able to exercise its sovereign authority, independently, throughout Afghanistan."

29 <http://nato.int/docu/update/2003/08-august/e0811a.htm>

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Nor was there any real sense in the NATO communications at the time that this would be a lengthy undertaking and certainly no talk of it possibly having a commitment timeline of a generation. “The assumption was that we’d be in for two years max, then be replaced – rotated in and out was the original thought,” said Bill Graham, the Canadian foreign affairs minister (2002-04) then defence minister (2004-06).³²

Some Key Strategic Issues Emerge Immediately. NATO’s first out-of-area force commander and HQ were faced with a multitude of issues typical of a ‘Rotation 0’ headquarters. But, the military and political chains of command overseeing the mission did not sufficiently anticipate how very different the mission would be once NATO was directly engaged in theatre, especially in light of the various factors that were inexorably driving NATO toward deeper engagement in Afghanistan.

While NATO in the lead would make sourcing and training the ISAF HQ easier than had been the case for the first three iterations, the force generation process at this stage was a particularly chaotic undertaking and unsatisfying for all parties. The jury-rigging of a mission to fit the forces on hand was already beginning to embarrass the Alliance at this point and by mid-2006 was leading to a major loss of credibility, with force generation and caveats standing as a defining, lasting characterisation in the public mind of the Afghanistan mission. Sourcing critical enablers was always the most challenging as these assets are the ones most in need by nations regardless of the mission set or where deployed, including but not limited to helicopters, medical support and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance).

Without long-term visibility on the requirements across the breadth of NATO operations and exercises, including for SFOR, KFOR and ISAF, and for major initiatives such as the NATO Response Force, NATO made operation-specific requests to nations for contributions of forces. Global force generation conferences, begun in November 2004, were an effort to provide greater visibility into NATO’s long-term force requirements and initially bore some success, at least to support the next limited round of expansion in the relatively stable northern region of Afghanistan.³³

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32 Interview, 2015.

33 Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Beckman, *From Assumption to Expansion: Planning and Executing NATO’s First Year in Afghanistan at the Strategic Level*, (United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania), 18 March 2005.



A French soldier on patrol in Kabul, 2004. Photo: NATO/ISAF

No one could reasonably accuse respective Secretaries General of not doing enough to cajole, browbeat or even plead for additional forces and reforms to improve the process. Secretary General George Robertson, in his NAC farewell speech in December 2003, for instance, warned that political will was needed to match actual national commitments: “Nations will have to waken up to what they have taken on,” he said. “[The ISAF] expansion must be credible, and be seen to be credible ... Failure would be a crushing blow, not just for NATO but also for every NATO country ... and for the concept of multilateralism in international relations. We had the mettle to deal with Bosnia’s murderous warlords. We had better find more iron in our soul to deal with Afghanistan’s variety.”³⁴

This was a soapbox that subsequent Alliance leaders would mount often during their terms, no more so than Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, who shepherded the organisation through the early years of the NATO-led ISAF mission. In a major speech to the UK’s Royal United Services Institute in advance of the 2004 Istanbul Summit, he said: “Let me be blunt. Missions such as Afghanistan present wholly new challenges in terms of generating forces. We have never done anything quite like this before...”³⁵ He posed the question that with all the resources at NATO’s disposal, why modest amounts of key capabilities could not be found even though political commitments had been made. The succinct three-fold reason: “the way we take political decisions, the way we plan and generate forces, and the way we are funding our operations and equipment.” Ten years later, these fundamental and seemingly intractable issues remain unresolved.

34 “Farewell speech to the Council by NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson”, NATO Web, December 2003.

35 <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2004/s040618a.htm>

The seeds for future force generation discontent had been sown during ISAF IV. By mid-point of the next ISAF tour, a knowledgeable former U.S. general officer summarised the force generation problem thusly to the commander of Central Command:

*“The NATO-ISAF force may mark the beginnings of the end for the North Atlantic Alliance’s ability to execute out-of-area operations. NATO Afghanistan cannot generate adequate forces, cannot generate the right kind of forces, deploys forces with severely restricted [Rules of Engagement] and national caveats (both explicit and unwritten), and deploys forces that cannot fight effectively nor support themselves with communications, transportation, and logistics. ISAF Field Commanders faced with command directives they do not wish to support will routinely defy instructions and get new guidance thru NATO political directives sent down thru the military headquarters in Brunssum to the ISAF commander. NATO-ISAF expansion to include the West and the South of Afghanistan would pose the immediate and real risk of another Srebrenica disaster with the population unprotected by an incapable or incompetent NATO force. ... NATO needs repair in a fundamental way. If it cannot be an effective MILITARY alliance, it is hard to imagine it retaining political strategic value.”*³⁶

The assumption of NATO command also brought the relationship with the American-led forces prosecuting the counter-terrorism campaign into full relief. Ominously, “the complexities surrounding the nature of the relationship between the U.S. OEF and NATO ISAF were ignored and dangerously unclear at the tactical, operational and strategic levels,” recalls a very senior officer from the ISAF IV tour.³⁷ If little was known of OEF within the NATO Command Structure at the time, the forces reporting direct to Central Command knew even less about NATO or ISAF. Days after the ISAF transfer of command, the OEF headquarters moved from Bagram Airfield to a location three kilometres from HQ ISAF in Kabul, in the centre of the ISAF area of operations. Suddenly, there were two, three-star force commanders, “with overlapping joint operational areas, each with a completely different mission, each responsive to different masters and no actual means to communicate with each other securely or otherwise, short of face-to-face,” recalled the officer. “It was a travesty at every level – tactical, operational and strategic,” made only moderately functional through inter-personal relationships built over time.³⁸

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36 Barry McCaffrey, *After-Action Report, Trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan* August 10, 2004. Retrieved at <http://www.mccaffreyassociates.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/AfghanAAR-072004.pdf>

37 Confidential interview.

38 Ibid.

The immediate operational focus of ISAF IV was assisting the planning and execution of the Loya Jirga later that year, in an environment featuring an unelected (but Bonn agreement-appointed) President working from a barely functioning capital still rife with political intrigue, dangerous machinations, and with agendas heavily influenced by the views and ideas of a small ‘star chamber’ of Western ambassadors. The operation was now subject to hands-on interest and oversight by military HQs at Brunssum and SHAPE, each commanded by four-star generals, as well by the NATO Chiefs of Defence through the Military Committee – in addition to the substantial new interest expressed by national capitals, the NAC and NATO HQ, all of which were starting out with limited knowledge of the actual, quickly evolving situation.

There was also a high level of anticipation by agencies and organisations already operating in theatre, including within the UN and Non-Governmental Organisations, who believed or at least certainly hoped that the arrival of NATO would portend an immediate improvement in the security situation allowing them to get out and about more easily. This was perhaps anticipating a similar outcome to that experienced beginning in late 1995 in the Balkans with the transition from UN to NATO security lead. Nationally-led ISAF HQs were bound by UNSCR resolutions, limited resources and a general disinclination to do more than provide a presence in the capital. The small and dispersed OEF forces were very focused on their mission, and not at all interested in having to provide outside ‘assistance’.

To add to the mix, in addition to the burgeoning new domestic media industry, the focus of regional and international media that were covering Afghanistan (and not Iraq) now turned first to the organisation seen as owning the security problem – NATO.

Organisation of Effort. The ISAF HQ force makeup was now based on a standing land HQ from the NATO Command Structure (JHQ Centre, based in Heidelberg, Germany), subordinate to AFNORTH HQ in Brunssum, which in turn reported to SHAPE in Mons, Belgium. This arrangement offered the prospect of thorough preparations to establish an integrated NATO HQ effort for the Alliance’s first out-of-region operation, in a combat environment thousands of kilometres from NATO borders. Further, the various strategic political-military considerations would also presumably be a driver for a resourced, coordinated, top-down strategic communications effort in support of theatre-level objectives. However, on both of those expectations, recounts the same very senior officer from that tour, “one would be very, very wrong.”

Lieutenant-General Gliemeroth was notified in mid-April 2003 that JHQ Centre would assume command of the ISAF mission in August of that year, leaving about three months to prepare. Anticipating little change to the existing mission, Brunssum HQ made clear their view that the staff of HQ ISAF should be no more than 85 personnel, with any shortages made up through ‘reaching back’ to AFNORTH HQ as required: incredibly, “requests for J5 planning staff were denied as unnecessary and the StratCom staff effort was to consist of a single Public Affairs major,” recalls the officer.³⁹ In the end, as a consequence of nationally directed inputs, the HQ ISAF establishment rose to 137 including just three general officers (Commander, Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff), eight colonels (Deputy Chief of Staff, J2 Intelligence, J3 Operations, J4 Logistics, J6 Information Systems, J9 Civil-Military Cooperation, HQ Support, and a military assistant to the Commander) and a NATO civilian political advisor though still with no J5 for operational planning.

The two senior command personalities involved allowed for an effective division of labour with the German COMISAF focused ‘up and out’ including with President Karzai’s office and to superior NATO HQs. The Canadian deputy Major-General Leslie focused ‘down and in’, overseeing the operational aspects of the mission including liaising regularly with Afghan counterparts. Even as the commander of the deployed NATO forces though, the German COMISAF was not authorised access to ‘5 Eyes’ (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, U.S.) intelligence reports and analysis, a major handicap for an organisation of like-minded members getting set to expand its mission in a country about to be beset by a raging counter-insurgency.

The Communications Effort. The idea of an integrated StratCom campaign “guided by NATO HQ with military, political and diplomatic elements and executed in theatre via a spectrum of assets was never in the cards,” recalled the officer.⁴⁰ In the face of these various strategic-level developments that cried out for a coordinated and resourced approach, the cap on HQ personnel meant the public affairs effort was a modest affair with as few as two officers and a photographer. Germany continued to field PSYOPS assets located at the Kabul Brigade including a radio station, a mobile broadcast troop and a print capability focused on producing newspapers and posters. The COMISAF was confident of the impact the information efforts were having at the time, claiming that more than a quarter of Kabulis tuned in to the ISAF station: “Soldiers also seek to spread ‘key messages’ among the population through their own contact with Afghans with whom they talk to gain a better understanding of the issues that affect them.

.....
39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

In addition, ISAF produces poster campaigns and other initiatives to inform locals about the arrival of new troops and other issues as they arise,” he said.⁴¹

Public Affairs reported to the Deputy Chief of Staff and conducted basic media relations, responded to media queries, briefed at regularly scheduled news conferences, and established an ‘internal information’ print publication, the *ISAF Mirror*, that allowed mainly national public affairs staff to highlight national projects and initiatives usually related to development.

National contingents continued to field a capability in public information, but without a critical mass at the strategic level HQ they operated essentially outside the NATO chain of command and focused almost exclusively on national needs and demands. The overlapping joint operational areas meant that OEF was also prosecuting their own information campaign focused on the ‘kill or capture’ mission that was by definition, distinctly different than the NATO security assistance mission. National NATO contingents for instance, objected to a series of “Wanted – Dead or Alive” posters, a tactical PSYOPS campaign by OEF which was illustrative of the disparity in approach between the organisations. Notwithstanding, there was considerable and regular effort to coordinate the communication effort with ISAF units and the various national command elements especially in support of operations including heavy weapons cantonment, the Loya Jirga, ISAF casualties, and the capture of key targeted individuals.

From a public diplomacy perspective, Secretary General Robertson made occasional visits to theatre but for the majority of the tour the COMISAF was the NATO Alliance representative in theatre, at least until the Senior Civilian Representative position was created and the incumbent established in theatre. Key Leader Engagement was left to a command group of less than a half dozen senior officers.

Direct-channel relationships between HQ ISAF and staffs at SHAPE, the Military Committee, the North Atlantic Council and the NATO Spokesperson’s office grew as the mission evolved and military/political/diplomatic interests, requirements and expectations multiplied. “It became fairly routine that the NATO Spokesperson’s office would deal directly with our tiny Public Affairs cell ... messages needed to be defined, refined and managed in ways that far outstripped our capacities in theatre,” recalled one officer familiar with the workings of the communication effort.⁴²

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41 Interview in *NATO Review*, Winter 2003.

42 Confidential interview

Thus, the Alliance entered into its first campaign that was about to feature active ground conflict, leading with a headquarters given three months warning to assume command of the mission, with no inherent J5 planning capability and a bare minimum of public affairs capability.

Unsurprisingly, in-theatre issues of a strategic communications nature took an increasing toll in time and effort of all command staff. During that tour the HQ was expected to establish a distinctly NATO presence, create security conditions for a successful Loya Jirga, establish a separate but related relationship as well as deconflict operations with OEF forces, attend to a plethora of expectations of NATO from agencies and organisations in theatre, execute the decision to expand the area of operations, and begin planning for a much more extensive engagement in the country – all the while ‘managing up’ two, four-star military HQs, the Military Committee, NATO HQ and the North Atlantic Council in this new undertaking.

In the face of a very challenging agenda particularly at the strategic political-military level, the ISAF IV tour is surely one of the most unheralded commands given its accomplishments at setting the foundation it did for the mission going forward.

Key strategic communications take-aways from this tour include:

- The strategic shear-points that would come to characterise the mission are already taking shape and form: public exposure of a serious force generation issue; the ‘mission impossible’ of articulating the duality of the related but substantively different ISAF-OEF missions involving forces from the same nations in both campaigns; and, managing the expectations of the international community about NATO’s ability to influence events, particularly security throughout the country.
- There was very little appreciation at higher military HQs of the elements and resources required for successful prosecution of a StratCom campaign in direct support of mission objectives. The ‘reach back if needed’ resourcing approach rather than ‘go in heavy, reduce if and as required’, left the first NATO-led ISAF mission with a basic capability to respond to media queries and to conduct routine yet limited PSYOPS communications with Afghan audiences. A force ceiling imposed on ISAF HQ failed to recognise that the communications component generates strategic, operational and tactical level outputs. From the start, NATO-led ISAF had ceded the ground and narrative to adversary forces.

CHAPTER 4.4

ISAF V

FEBRUARY - AUGUST 2004

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL RICK HILLIER, CANADA

“Afghanistan has revealed that NATO has reached the stage where it is a corpse, decomposing, and somebody’s going to have to perform a Frankenstein-like life giving act by breathing some lifesaving air through those rotten lips into those putrescent lungs, or the Alliance will be done.”

General Rick Hillier, former Canadian Chief of the Defence Staff ⁴³

28 March 2004: National elections in June are delayed to September to allow more time to prepare.

31 March - 1 April 2004: Major donors’ conference on Afghanistan in Berlin.

28 June 2004: At the Istanbul Summit, NATO announces it will expand its presence in Afghanistan with four additional Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in the North.

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Expansion of the NATO mission beyond Kabul: how far and how quickly would the alliance take on more responsibility, troop contributions, and not being seen as an occupying force	Managing dynamics between senior officials: COMISAF-Comd Brunssum (challenging); the first NATO Senior Civilian Representative (harmonious); and amongst various national contingent Commanders many with different national agendas	Poppy eradication effort is driving many to the Taliban and other armed groups
ISAF cantoning heavy weapons but warlords are still a tolerated power base with influence that grew through political alliances as elections drew near	Force protection, with quite different national variations: balance and tension between keeping troops safe, and seen to be out among population	Insurgent activity including bombings and targeting of officials ahead of the national election
The alternative livelihood program (the UK-led poppy eradication campaign)	Efforts to induce closer relations with U.S.-led OEF forces	Force generation issues
Development of the Afghan National Development Strategy		Jack Idema/ Task Force Sabre Seven (arrest of a rogue U.S. former soldier)

43 *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats, and the Politics of War*, Harper Collins, (2009), p. 477.

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This tour marks the genesis of StratCom as a process-driven capability in ISAF.

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Context. This tour was notable for helping set the conditions for success of the first-ever Presidential elections, and the decision to further expand the NATO mission beyond Kabul with four more PRTs in the relatively stable North, adding to the existing pilot project at Kunduz. In addition, this tour marks the genesis of StratCom as a process-driven capability in ISAF.⁴⁴

In spite of the many profound and deep-rooted institutional problems Afghanistan faced

there was early optimism that things were starting to turn for the better, including for the nascent economy. The security situation, while challenging, had improved after considerable tactical success of the American-led coalition effort that kept pressure on dispersed Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces. The overt focus on counter-terrorism was starting to give way to a broader counter-insurgency effort as Provincial Reconstruction Teams, aid money and reconstruction work took greater shape and form. Voter registration numbers were promising, and there was still a ‘honeymoon period’ of general support in most areas for NATO and the UN mission.

At this early juncture a widely accepted view was that NATO was achieving success on the communication front, with the U.S. coalition taking the brunt of fallout from the kinetic-focused counter-terrorism campaign in the rest of the country. Attacks from Taliban and other armed groups were periodic in nature, with few NATO casualties. Commander Chris Henderson, the Chief Public Affairs Officer for the tour, recalls that, “NATO was generally seen as a non-U.S. force for good in the limited areas in which it operated and that gave them the benefit of the doubt.

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44 The ARRC tour with the Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia 1995-96 commanded by Lieutenant-General Michael Walker was an early precursor of NATO StratCom. Then, a British artillery colonel heading media operations had broad authority to integrate the other information-related disciplines in support of the commander's information effect-focused effort. However, this experience came and went with the Corps in theatre when it was replaced by a U.S. HQ, at the same time the mission was re-named the Stabilisation Force (SFOR).

There was a lot of aid money floating around, UNAMA and NGOs were very active, and there was a vibrant international press corps in the capital. The successful expansion of the mission, pre-election success, the return of some stability and some economic activity in the capital all contributed to a positive effect.”⁴⁵ The cynicism and ill-will from the siphoning of aid money, corruption, the decrepit state of the Afghan civil service, and the international community’s inability to drive change had not yet taken root.

The divergence of national effort was beginning to play itself out on a number of fronts, early evidence of the overall failure of a comprehensive approach by the international community. Central to this was the division of labour agreed at the donor conference in Geneva in 2002 that allocated five pillars for security sector reform to lead nations: military reform to the U.S.; police reform to Germany; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration to Japan; judicial reform to Italy; and counter-narcotics to the U.K.⁴⁶

On the whole, it was not an obvious allocation of responsibilities and each quickly exposed differences of approach amongst nations. For instance, the German-led police training mission favoured long periods of training by a minimalist staff for a small senior Afghan leadership cadre, while the U.S. favoured shorter periods for as many as possible.⁴⁷ The subject that was to really divide NATO allegiances though was the critical counter-narcotics effort being led nationally by the UK, to wide condemnation even at this stage of the effort. “We have a limited time to jump on this cancer before it spreads and becomes inoperable,” wrote retired General Barry McCaffrey on a fact-finding visit for Central Command Commander General John Abizaid.⁴⁸ “This will defeat our war on terrorism aims by negating any ability to build a lawful, stable Afghan State. If we lack the will to take on this problem we will go over a cliff in the coming 24 months and see Afghanistan racked by drug-fuelled narco-insurgent civil war. The Brit’s [sic] have inadequate resources, people, political will and leverage to take on this problem ... they are faking the effort.”⁴⁹

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45 Personal communication.

46 This way of organising the effort would remain until the London donor conference in early 2006. <http://www.ssresourcecentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Country-Profile-Afghanistan-April-5.pdf>

47 Anthony H. Cordesman, Adam Mausner, Jason Lemieux, *Afghan National Security Forces: What it Will Take to Implement the ISAF Strategy*, November 2010.

48 McCaffrey, (2004).

49 Sherard Cowper-Coles, the British Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2007-2009, was no less complimentary of the effort three years later: "In London, and in Kabul, we assembled vast, multi-disciplinary teams of officials and agents ... on somehow collapsing the Afghan drug economy. In my first year in Kabul, I spent more time and effort on this subject than any other, almost all of it wasted ... in truth we made little headway in interfering with market forces more powerful than the governments trying to counteract them." Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables From Kabul*, (2011), p. 80.

The RAND research institute calculated that the U.S. was spending seven times the resources to counter-narcotics activities provided by the UK, nearly 50 times the resources to the police provided by Germany, and almost everything for training the Afghan military.⁵⁰

Outside the ‘official’ security sector reform apparatus, Canada, while committed to NATO and ISAF, under COMISAF Hillier was supporting senior-level mentoring for Afghan ministries that later evolved into a Canadian national effort, the Strategic Advisory Team Afghanistan (SAT-A). Many nations continued to recognise ISAF as little more than peacekeeping even while the killed-in-action toll grew. Deaths were still predominantly American but when other nations suffered losses they were challenged to square the circle to their publics.

Organising the Effort. By late-2003, Canada was the major contributor of forces to the NATO mission. Tom Ring, Assistant Deputy Minister for Public Affairs at the Department of National Defence, recalled of the Hillier ISAF command period that, “The mission was eight time zones and 10,000 kilometres from our capital. The Forces’ budget was under tremendous pressure and it was early days in our deliberate effort to transform the long-standing public perception of the military from peacekeepers in soft blue berets to that of a respected fighting force, however small. We were making major investments to enhance combat camera capability and significant training reforms to our full-time public affairs branch. When Hillier – then the Army commander – was chosen to lead ISAF, the decision was made to deploy, literally our best PAOs at each rank in support.”⁵¹

The COMISAF was “an officer who could never be accused of being a conventional thinker,” recalled a staff officer familiar with his command. During the pre-deployment preparations in December 2003, Hillier met with President Karzai who identified four key problem areas facing his Transitional Authority government: internal and external threats including warlords, narco-traffickers, malign actors and the Taliban; the lack of human capacity in state institutions including the security forces; the international community’s lack of unity of effort; and the government’s inability to proactively communicate to the Afghan people. At the heart of creating positive momentum in each of the areas of concern was improved communications. Senior staff brainstormed a number of issues including how to better integrate the information and liaison functions to greater effect, and the idea of pooling them under one senior

50 Seth Jones, Olga Oliker, Peter Chalk, C. Christine Fair, Rollie Lal, James Dobbins, *Securing Tyrants or Fostering Reform? U.S. Internal Security Assistance to Repressive and Transitioning Regimes*, RAND, 2006.

51 Interview.

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We recognised from the start that information, its management and its use was a strategic weapon for us.

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officer took shape and form as a Theatre Information Coordination cell or TIC, under an OF-5 (Colonel), Guy Thibault.⁵² That this officer was a signals officer was a coincidence and had no bearing on the selection. He later rose to be the second-most senior officer in the Canadian Forces – Vice Chief of the Defence Staff.

It was a controversial move at the time. Some nations, particularly Germany, objected to what they viewed as a conjoined effort of

Public Affairs and PSYOPS that was prohibited by NATO policy. Four years later, the same concern stemming from a similar organisational structural change then being considered by COMISAF General McKiernan would be leaked to media in theatre by NATO officers and officials opposed to the idea, causing considerable commotion. In 2004, with NATO attention mainly focused on the Balkans and the Afghan mission ‘under control’, these concerns surfaced and were resolved internally at ISAF.

“We recognised from the start that information, its management and its use was a strategic weapon for us,” said Hillier. “It would build confidence with Afghans at large, potential and real warring factions, warlords, politicians, entrepreneurs and leaders from disparate parts of their society, including women. We also needed to message to Pakistan and (somewhat) Iran, NATO HQ, NATO members, our own troops, the Coalition, other international players especially the UN and EU, but also the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Corporation and the World Bank. Our normal inattention to information, its flow, use and accuracy was no longer acceptable. From our earliest days we operated with the view that ‘perception is reality’ and that we had to ‘shape the perception’. Then, the awesome leaders took that and ran with it to include training and mentoring of Afghan press.”⁵³

52 Confidential interview with a senior officer.

53 Communication with General Hillier.

This communications-first posture was fostered from the first time the multinational ISAF V staff gathered for their Mission Rehearsal Exercise (MRE) just a couple of weeks prior to deploying. It was Hillier who inculcated the StratCom mindset into the entire staff from multiple NATO and partner nations. This was a significant departure from the norm, and at higher headquarters in NATO there was discussion and consternation about the propriety of a deployed field commander directly engaging key leaders and audiences outside his explicit area of operations, particularly with Pakistani officials.

In Theatre. Manning levels for the communications and information-related capabilities were reported as “adequate” for the time and place including a capable, resourced German PSYOPS unit and a basic media operations capability of about a dozen including limited imagery support, a driver and a dedicated civilian Afghan interpreter. Connections with national contingents were reported as good as the Canadian public affairs officers at ISAF HQ instituted weekly public affairs meetings with all national contingents within ISAF – Canadian, French, Italian, Norwegian, and Greek, the location of which changed every week – where current issues and upcoming events were discussed and planned. ISAF HQ began joint news conferences with OEF three times a week to ensure greater synergy of public affairs effort. To assist Afghan media attendance the public affairs vehicle and driver was dispatched to collect local media who might not otherwise have been able to travel to the news conferences. ISAF media statements were translated the previous night into Pashtu and Dari with hard copies distributed at the news conference and electronic versions available for Afghan media by USB stick (this being a fairly new technology at the time).

A senior HQ staff member from that tour recalls that the rest of the Theatre Information Coordination cell consisted of a targeting section of four or five mainly combat arms officers “who might have had an Info Ops course,” but suffered from a lack of doctrine, custom, policy, training and SOPs. They “spent months developing a complex targeting matrix that identified key ‘targets’ for influence activities, with personality profiles, vulnerabilities, media through which they would likely be accessed, and so on. They worked hard on charts and bios and photos but I am not aware of a single instance of the targets actually being engaged through any other deliberate means than public affairs.”⁵⁴

“

There were significant benefits as a consequence of the TIC structure. It worked, but only because Hillier operated on the basis of operational requirement, untainted by NATO politics and doctrine.

”

The TIC was established because “there was no conventional structural component that could harness the collective potential of the information capabilities,” recalls that same officer. “Information Operations at that time deployed with a concept of integration but had no effective capacity in the form of trained and experienced personnel to effect such an effort.”

Hillier then reinforced intent with frequent direction and attention to communications.

“He sought input, listened actively, and willingly agreed to those things proposed that made sense to him ... It was a clear example of the commander knowing and trusting his team and that sentiment permeated the HQ,” said the officer.

SHAPE continued with a long-established daily media operations coordination call but there was little need for direct guidance and oversight since the missions in the Balkans were the most politically sensitive and pressing from NATO’s point of view. NATO HQ liaised direct with theatre where required in rare cases including in April for the first visit of the North Atlantic Council to Afghanistan. Certainly, from time to time ‘stuff happened’ and thrust the mission into the limelight as was the strange case of Jack Idema, an American mercenary professing to be operating under instructions from his government. He was charged and later found guilty by Afghan authorities for running an unlicensed jail, where Afghans were detained and severely mistreated.

“The Idema story stands out as a case study in bad operations being fixed by good communications,” said Henderson. “One day posters appeared on lampposts and telephone poles around Kabul stating that the Government of the United States disavowed any knowledge of, or connection with, Jack Idema. Soon after, I was approached and asked if it was true that NATO had provided material assistance to his vigilante counter-terrorist group. As it turns out, we had provided bomb-sniffer dogs on three occasions and I had to stand up at the weekly ISAF news conference and admit that “NATO had been hoodwinked.”⁵⁵

The fact this publicly caught ISAF off-guard was not an atypical example of the Intelligence function's *modus operandi*, recalled several officers for this study. Intel assets withheld information under the misguided thinking that 'if you tell Public Affairs anything they'll tell media so we better keep this to ourselves.'

"There were significant benefits as a consequence of the TIC structure," said Brigadier-General Serge Labbé, the Deputy Chief of Staff for the tour. "It worked but only because Hillier operated on the basis of operational requirement, untainted by NATO politics and doctrine."⁵⁶

The mainly Kabul-based ISAF of mid-2004 faced quite different circumstances than the ISAF of 2009-2010 with forces deployed throughout Afghanistan engaged in an active counter-insurgency. Still, the organisational design experiment of this tour should be considered a success for four principal reasons:

- The commander put achieving information effect at the heart of the mission and drove the effort personally, even referring often to himself as a 'precision-guided munition' for the force;
- The command staff understood and actively supported the commander's intent in this area;
- The effort was led and supported by hand-picked staff with experience of multiple operations including Bosnia, not leaving the manning of key billets to the 'hope and prayer' force generation process of the NATO Crisis Establishment process; and,
- The respective functional responsibilities of the communication and information capabilities were respected and operated in a command climate of open, constructive communications.

CHAPTER 4.5

ISAF VI

AUGUST 2004 - FEBRUARY 2005

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL JEAN-LOUIS PY, FRANCE, EUROCORPS

“[We] find ourselves in a situation where we are obliged to take on certain emergency projects. Wherever we go we are asked to provide various kinds of support. The first request is usually for decent roads to enable neighbouring towns to begin trading with each other. The next is for purified water since at present most people do not have purified water to drink. And then it is for electricity since there is a great lack of electricity. And then it is for a decent hospital. We are only providing emergency solutions to create a starting point for reconstruction in these provinces before the central government is able to step in with its national priority programmes.”

Lieutenant-General Py⁵⁷

7 October 2004: First-ever direct Presidential elections in Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai is declared the winner on 3 November.

10 February 2005: NATO decides to expand ISAF to the west of Afghanistan.

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Contributing to security of Kabul including the international airport and in the North, and heavy weapons cantonment	Position Afghan forces in leadership role for security	Election security including rocket attacks in Kabul, and election preparations
Safe(r) driving of ISAF forces	Safe(r) driving of ISAF forces	Presidential election and formation of national Govt
Security sector reform	Effectiveness and reporting relationship of PRTs	Drug trade, and violence associated with narcotics
The crash of an AFG civilian aircraft near Kabul as command transitioned to ISAF VII		Slow pace of reconstruction and development

Context. The risk of changing an entire Corps-level HQ in the immediate lead-up to a major event like the national election was a source of some angst in many quarters including to Afghan officials as well as in participating nations. The pre-deployment training investment led again by Joint Force Command Brunssum went some way to “validate our readiness, a key to assuring Afghan leadership that the transition would be stable and that the next phase of NATO expansion would not be compromised,” said Lieutenant-Commander Ken MacKillop, the main spokesperson for the ISAF VI tour.

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57 Quoted in interview with *NATO Live*, at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_21170.htm?selectedLocale=en

The NATO-led ISAF could look with a degree of satisfaction to its accomplishments by the end of its first year in place having supported successful national elections and expanding the size of its area of operations twice. The election took place in relative security with an unexpectedly high level of participation, indicative of broad general support for the process, with the inauguration of President Karzai building a sense of positive momentum. The expansion of the number of Afghan media also lent weight to the view that capacity building efforts to develop an objective and professional media presence were taking form.

The cantonment of heavy weapons and the disarmament and demobilisation process in and around Kabul were proceeding satisfactorily though operating within the frenetic city was not without its challenges. For instance, in the month of August there were more than 50 traffic accidents involving ISAF forces, injuring 45 and killing one Afghan – a third of all injuries to ISAF personnel for 2004 to that point.⁵⁸ The ‘non-military’ challenges associated with reconstruction and development were also not far from the minds of NATO commanders nor were the general security conditions and the violence associated with criminal networks, including the drug trade. As Py remarked at the time, “An effective Afghan National Army and police will be critical when it comes to counter-narcotics operations. The drug problem poses the greatest medium-term threat to Afghanistan and could destabilise the entire country if it is not dealt with as soon as possible. This is, therefore, an issue, which has to be addressed now.”⁵⁹

Organisation. The bulk of staff for ISAF VI were drawn from Eurocorps, augmented by forces from the Air Component Command HQ in Ramstein and other individually sourced staff to build a multinational HQ of representatives from more than 30 nations. Germany led the brigade forces, facilitating interaction and a working relationship between the HQs forged over previous joint training and operations. There were no notable organisational changes to the information disciplines during this tour though a broad and overarching approach to Command-directed integrated communications is less evident than was the case for the previous tour.

The Theatre Information Coordination construct was retained, originally led by a UK officer who left theatre for a national assignment and was replaced by a Norwegian colonel deployed from Brunssum. As before, the entity was responsible for Info Ops, PSYOPS and Liaison, reporting to the Chief of Staff. A member from Public Information attended the daily coordination meeting chaired by the TIC staff.

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58 COMISAF Editorial, *ISAF Mirror*, October 2004.

59 Lieutenant-General Py interview with *NATO Review*. Retrieved from http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_21170.htm?selectedLocale=en



The Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, General Ray Henault talks to Colonel Gintautas Zenkevicius, Commander of the Chagcharan PRT, 2005. Photo: NATO/ISAF

The Chief PIO, Lieutenant-Colonel Patrick Poulain, remained part of the Command Group, reporting directly to COMISAF and regularly back briefing the Chief of Staff. The Public Information Office consisted of a team of 16 including translators, media ops, plans, video/web, and publications (the *ISAF Mirror*). Staff were drawn mainly from the existing Eurocorps organisation, augmented by officers from France, the UK and the U.S. While at Eurocorps HQ in Strasbourg, Poulain had served with the commander as well as with the Chief of Staff. Thus, while not equal in rank in comparison to the other divisional heads, the personalities were well known to each other, an arrangement that worked effectively from a communications management perspective.

The TIC group consisted mainly of Eurocorps staff and colleagues which facilitated good working relations. The Command team could be accessed easily and regularly “when required to validate information, seek operational support, or obtain Commander’s approval on official statements,” recalls MacKillop. The Info Ops chief worked from the same office as the TIC with an officer from that group acting as liaison to the PSYOPS Task Force, a grouping more akin to bottom-up coordination rather than being driven top-down to maximise information effect.

In practice, the media and public information effort dominated among the communication capabilities with little overt capability or capacity by Info Ops to generate an ‘overarching roadmap’ to guide and shape the activities of the various elements.



NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer talking to the press, Chagcharan airport, 2005. Photo: NATO/ISAF

While an active tour, the routine of attending to media was sufficient for one spokesperson who continued to appear alongside his American coalition counterpart twice a week, once at each respective HQ, and to regularly attend the UNAMA weekly news conferences. As part of an initiative to develop indigenous media capability, Poulain created a post for a local journalist in the Media Ops team and recalls, “from that moment I had the impression that our relationship with local media improved greatly and that they became more aware of the good things that NATO was doing for the country.” In addition, a concerted effort was made to effect coordination amongst national contingents to improve NATO visibility.

In a related vein, the old concern of the Info Ops-Public Affairs relationship presented itself once again, this time at the American coalition HQ. The spokesperson there was trained and had five years’ experience in public affairs but was now an Info Ops officer by trade. “The commanding general wanted to see cross rifles [a combat arms officer] up there on the stage for credibility,” said the officer. “With a background across the information spectrum, I was able to do the PA job but also had real insight into the other functions. As an operator, I had greater access to information to know what was really happening on the ground by virtue of a closer connection to the ops and intel side than public affairs on its own.”⁶⁰ Notwithstanding, this situation eventually generated a debate that wound its way up to the highest U.S. Department of Defense public affairs authorities. With pressure from Public Affairs to have one of their own out front and centre as spokesperson, and pressure from the officer’s parent Branch to focus on those activities, the officer was replaced as spokesperson.

CHAPTER 4.6

ISAF VII

FEBRUARY 2005 - AUGUST 2005

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL ETHEM ERDAGI

NATO RAPID DEPLOYMENT CORPS - TURKEY

“We regret that we got any part of our story wrong, and extend our sympathies to victims of the violence and to the U.S. soldiers caught in its midst.”

Newsweek editor, Mark Whitaker⁶¹

24 March 2005: Security Council resolution 1589.

May 2005: Following reports of the desecration of the Koran in Guantanamo Bay, anti-American riots in Afghanistan result in 17 deaths, injuring 100.

8 June 2005: NATO defence ministers state that the Alliance will provide additional support for forthcoming elections and is planning for ISAF expansion to the south (stage 3).

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Coordination with OEF	Mentoring and training of staff; lack of experience in trade	Airline crash near Kabul
Disarmament efforts	Managing Key Leader Engagement more effectively	Riots over reports of desecration of the Koran (in Guantanamo Bay)
Stage 1 and 2 expansion (North and West)	Separating Public Affairs from Info Ops messaging to publics	Expansion of NATO mission
Preparations for election (that did not occur)		

Context. The newly inaugurated President Karzai faced no shortage of challenges. In an interview in January 2005 with the publication *ISAF Mirror* he reiterated the long litany of priorities: “the rebuilding of Afghanistan, the completion of the institutions of Afghanistan, the rebuilding of the Afghan bureaucracy, [and] the judicial system” as well as the continuation of the fight against terrorism and drugs, the latter “among the most important of our tasks,” with efforts required “in a massive way.”⁶²

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Newsweek was the first to publish reports of the Koran being desecrated, which they later admitted was based on incorrect information. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/may/16/pressandpublishing.usnews>

62 http://www.nato.int/ISAF/docu/mirror/2005/mirror_16_200503.pdf

The most recent UN Security Council Resolution recognised a similar list of urgent needs including “the fight against narcotics, the lack of security in certain areas, terrorist threats, comprehensive nationwide disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of the Afghan Militia Forces and disbandment of illegal armed groups, timely preparation for the parliamentary, provincial and district elections, development of Afghan Government institutions, acceleration of justice sector reform, promotion and protection of human rights, and economic and social development.”⁶³ The UN also called upon all actors including OEF and ISAF to specifically address “factional violence among militia forces and criminal activities, in particular violence involving the drug trade.”

None of these shortcomings by now was a surprise to the international community even as efforts continued in preparation for expansion of the mission to the volatile south. The disarmament portion of the security sector reform DDR (disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration) line of effort concluded in mid-July to good effect with 9,000 heavy weapons and 35,000 light weapons surrendered. A complementary program, the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG), meant to enhance security before scheduled elections, collected 15,000 light weapons in three weeks. This still left an estimated 4 to 5 million light weapons and 1,500 armed groups in the country.⁶⁴

Organisation. The construct of the TIC with nominal coordinating responsibility over Info Ops, Public Affairs and PSYOPS remained in place for this tour and other than staff rotations, the communication structure remained the same. The TIC group met at least once a week and sometimes more frequently, as events required. In addition, the Chief PSYOPS and Chief Public Affairs Officer met on their own regularly to identify further mutually beneficial opportunities including interviewing the Spokesperson for PSYOPS radio and even loaning locally engaged staff to assist with the monitoring of Afghan media.

Turkey is one of many NATO members without significant out-of-country operational experience of proactive and engaged communications with international media, nor a deep well of trained communication practitioners. Like other rotations they were tested early: within the first days of the Corps arriving, ISAF soldiers had killed an Afghan pedestrian as well as a civilian in a vehicle for failing to stop at a checkpoint.

And a civilian passenger airliner travelling from Herat in the midst of a major winter storm crashed into mountains 20 kms to the east of Kabul killing all 104 passengers.

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63 Security Council Resolution 1589, March 2005.

64 Brief by Lieutenant-General Erdagi to The Washington Institute, November 2005.

The Taliban information campaign was already active, claiming that ISAF shot the plane down, and it was days later before rescue personnel including from ISAF were able to reach the scene.

Karen Tissot van Patot, an experienced Canadian Forces public affairs officer acted in both Chief PAO and Spokesperson roles for the duration of the tour. This demanding situation occurred when it became clear at the mission rehearsal exercise that the intended Chief PAO, a colonel with the Corps with no related experience in communications, would be unsuited to that position. The pre-deployment training proved its worth once again and was “critical to establishing early relationships among new staff,” she recalled.

The TIC group had approximately a dozen staff, mainly majors and lieutenant-colonels. The public affairs section was close to a dozen staff, half of which were Turkish officers augmented from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, UK and the U.S., with several having no training at all. “On balance, the group worked very hard, were smart and dedicated. But there was very little experience in the related field and our capacity to operate in English was reduced as a result,” recalled an officer on the tour. This lack of practical experience on a deployed operation and the language constraints reduced the opportunity for proactive engagements to, “in effect waiting for the phone to ring, then reading the media lines word-for-word in broken English.”

A major focus for the TIC was the concerted effort to better synchronise key leader engagements. “The idea was to treat every high-level meeting with an important stakeholder – mainly Afghans both ‘friendly’ and otherwise, but also key players from other countries and international organisations as an engagement opportunity aimed at achieving certain effects,” recalled Colonel Jim Selbie, the deputy chief of staff for this tour. “This involved a great deal of preparation to assemble background information, define what our objectives should be and lines to take by our seniors. Despite the effort, it was probably to mixed results.” This is not an uncommon outcome: as the ISAF mission evolved, strategic engagement got more and more complicated. Despite more resources being applied, it would be another six years before ISAF staff finally seem to be generally satisfied with the way the key leader engagement line of effort was being conducted.

Coordination between information offices in ISAF and OEF was frequent and required significant effort. There were two joint news conferences per week and in addition, the ISAF Spokesperson continued to attend and brief at the weekly UN news conference. Within ISAF HQ, regular communication, liaison and the exchange of information amongst the communities was facilitated by the TIC.

Media monitoring and analysis during deployments to non-NATO member or partner states is usually a challenge particularly with respect to capturing, translating and assessing local and regional media.

Connectivity issues meant locally engaged staff were better able to monitor radio from home and so worked from there periodically, and the analysis products were shared across the communication disciplines and even with the Afghan government. “Notably, the U.S. forces would not share their media analysis products with us,” said Tissot van Patot. “That, despite a team that was about twice the size of ours, with an entire fully trained media group from Pacific Command that rotated in.”

At this stage of the campaign, the lack of capacity within nations to deploy trained practitioners in the various communication and information functions (though much less so an issue with PSYOPS) and a dearth of resources were the main limiting factors to more proactive communications. Doctrine, it was recounted, “was all over the place.” Further, any substantive effort at communication capacity building amongst Afghan ministries was almost two years off making it particularly challenging to convince Afghan government representatives to take the communication lead in response to events as they unfolded. Overall, this tour suggests a more traditional, media response-driven operation with less-than-optimally resourced communication functions making do as best they could to react to events as they occurred. Communication capabilities were viewed as a means to respond to situations more so than as a prospective tool to drive and shape the course of events.

Of note, Turkey’s leadership of this tour is well regarded by many commentators and was certainly assisted by the shared cultural understanding and insight only the Turks among NATO nations could bring to the mission. In addition, “Lieutenant-General Erdagi was constantly on the move engaging Afghans,” said Selbie. “I remember being impressed by his order that people take off their sunglasses when engaging with the population.”

The following observations are made from this tour:

- Challenging pre-deployment training of Command Groups is critical, even with (or especially at!) Corps-level HQs .
- The effective execution of routine operations lacking a critical mass of trained and operationally experienced staff within a specialist community is challenging enough. When language capability is added as a further constraint for key members of the Command Group and for public affairs staff, the opportunity for proactive engagement is significantly reduced.

CHAPTER 4.7

ISAF VIII

AUGUST 2005 - MAY 2006

GENERAL MAURO DEL VECCHIO

NATO RAPID DEPLOYMENT CORPS - ITALY

“ISAF recognises that expanding its area of responsibility into the south is a challenge, but September 11 taught us that terrorism thrives where there is no stability, no effective governance - no security. One of the reasons why we are expanding into the south is to deny insurgents an ungoverned space where they can plan and wreak terror. The key to the success of Stage III is to move into that space, and create the conditions that allow the PRTs to assist the Government to connect with the people.”

Commander Sue Eagles, ISAF Spokesperson, April 2006

“General Del Vecchio was also quite clear that the operational plan, I think the Ambassadors as well, that the operational plan that has been agreed, and that is being put into place, is adequate and appropriate for the mission. That was echoed by Ambassadors around the table. But it is also clear that NATO’s officials, that includes our military officials, are making a continuous assessment of the security environment, and if any adjustment is necessary it will be made.”

NATO Spokesperson briefing, May 2006⁶⁵

18 September 2005: First parliamentary, district and local elections in Afghanistan in 30 years.

8 December 2005: Foreign ministers endorse a revised operational plan for expansion of ISAF to the south and agree to develop an Afghan cooperation programme (defence reform, defence institution building and military aspects of security sector reform).

31 Jan - 1 Feb 2006: The London Conference on Afghanistan/the Afghanistan Compact.

7 February 2006: Riots in several cities and clashes near the Norwegian-led PRT in Meymana are sparked by cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

15 February 2006: UNSCR 1659 welcomes continued expansion of ISAF and a closer relationship with OEF.

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65 Weekly Press Briefing, 24 May 2006, <http://www.nato.int/DOCU/speech/2006/s060524a.htm>

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Third phase of expansion planning (to the South)	Expansion to the south	What should NATO expect in the south
Patrols and routine operations, including joint patrols with Afghan forces	Developing effective Afghan National Security Forces	Uprising at Pol-e-Charki prison
Support to elections		Meymana PRT

Overview. This was the first “extended deployment” of an ISAF HQ beyond six months. NATO Senior Civilian Representative Hikmet Cetin had witnessed four such COMISAF military changes of command since his appointment, and would see a fifth during the May 2006 rotation to the Allied Command Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC). The Italian Corps HQ was the fourth of five NATO-accredited graduated force HQs to deploy and serve as a formed unit, the ARRC being next and the last. NRDC-IT provided the commander, about 200 of the 600-strong HQ, 600 for logistics and related support for a nine-month tour, and another 1,300 more Italian forces supporting the Brigade in Kabul, including the commander.⁶⁶ The ISAF mission at this point was about 8,000 troops from 37 NATO and non-NATO nations.⁶⁷

The communications-related activities during this tour were by now, routine. There were regular media briefings conducted jointly with American coalition forces, but these were neither frequent nor lengthy, continuing in the same vein as rotations past.⁶⁸ The briefings were general accounts of patrols, plans and progress toward expanding the mission. The news conference podium, PSYOPS products and regular public information activities were opportunities to highlight significant events such as weapons caches, part of the DIAG (Disarming Illegally Armed Groups) effort. One such haul for instance, was estimated to have netted “1 bunker of detonators, 2 bunkers containing approximately 80 tonnes of Russian TNT, another bunker with approximately 15,000 Anti-Personnel and 10,000 Anti-Tank mines, and a fifth bunker which is still being assessed and examined,”⁶⁹ with media opportunities to showcase the work such as destroying the mines.

66 *ISAF Mirror*, August 2005, p. 15.

67 *NRDC-IT Magazine*, Issue No. 5, Winter 2005. p. 5. See http://www.nrdc-ita.nato.int/db_object/www_nrdc-ita_nato_int/usr/file/magazine_2005.pdf

68 In August 2005, there was two such briefings, 2 in September, weekly in October, 2 in November, 3 in December and 2 each from January to April. When the ARRC took command, weekly briefs become the routine, with at least 4 in each of May, June, July, August and September 2006.

69 See http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/speech/2006/speech_06mar06.htm



Lithuanian soldier at the PRT in Ghor Province. Photo: NATO/ISAF

This was the second consecutive tour of a commander who was not entirely comfortable in dealing with media in English, and media sightings and interviews with the COMISAF were rare. That was not much of a concern or focus to NATO HQ with the Balkans mission drawing the interest of most parties. To this point influence effects were not major considerations, including during the pre-deployment mission rehearsal exercises (MRE) run by Joint Force Command Brunssum. “Information was not a big part of it,” explained a senior officer who participated in six MREs from COMISAFs Gliemeroth to Richards. “There would be a series of briefings on Afghanistan with very knowledgeable persons. They would run through policies and procedures with the entire Command group. The information piece was entirely responsive and reactive, classic ‘how to get out of trouble’, and ‘what are the holding lines’ stuff.”⁷⁰

Preparations for the hand-over of the south and east from the U.S. to NATO were the main driver of effort though there was still not a particularly good sense that the NATO military HQs knew what to expect. “We have made a very thorough security assessment on the area [in the] South and what we have to expect, with regards to the opposing forces and we have tailored the force package to what we need to meet those challenges,” said General Gerhard Back, the commander of Joint Force Command Brunssum, in May 2006.



General David Richards (L) and General Mauro Del Vecchio, 2006. Photo: NATO/ISAF

“The ISAF mission is a different one from the [U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom counterinsurgency] mission because we stretch much more the reconstruction side, as well as the security side. So we have to balance this, in ISAF we put much more effort and much more focus on the reconstruction side ...”⁷¹

The Americans with OEF knew what to expect, though. “The U.S. forces I worked with in the Coalition HQ from early to mid-2006 were resentful that NATO was taking over responsibility from them,” shared an officer. “Every day there were comments to the effect that NATO was incapable of running the fight. There was a feeling of ownership forged through familiarity, of having carried the burden almost alone for so long, and a certain level of shell shock. As the handover of RC (South) was taking place, I observed a tremendous amount of perceived doctrinal difference in the Info Ops and PSYOPS handovers, exacerbated by an intransigence by U.S. operators to cooperate with the NATO “amateurs.” This was fuelled by the fact that American forces had been there for a much longer period and consisted of experienced, formed units who had worked up prior to theatre. The perception was that NATO, especially in the Info Ops world, fielded staff that came from all elements of their respective forces including from the navy and air force, who had never been involved in a major army campaign and had varying degrees of pre-deployment training.” NATO’s most important post-Cold War test was on the horizon.

CHAPTER 4.8

ISAF IX

MAY 2006 - FEBRUARY 2007

GENERAL DAVID RICHARDS, UNITED KINGDOM

HEADQUARTERS ALLIED RAPID REACTION CORPS (ARRC)

“As someone who has spent the best part of a year analysing how we will conduct operations in the South, I am more than confident that the sceptics will be proved wrong. I have the forces; the Rules of Engagement; a caveat-free environment to do everything that I need ... This is not done in isolation; it is very much done in partnership with the Afghan Army. When people talk about not enough troops and things my immediate riposte is actually we’ve got double, as I’ve just said, but also they must start factoring in more and more, [an] increasingly capable Afghan Army, with whom we will have the strongest relationship.”

Lieutenant-General David Richards, on assuming command of ISAF, May 2006⁷²

“But I think we have taken the necessary measures. I think we will have maybe one or two months where there will be a little bit of crisis, but with the measures already taken, also with the operation planned jointly with ISAF and Afghan National Army, I think that in a short period I think you will see a drastic change, change in the security situation, in the south. And I’m quite confident that what will happen, it is so simple ... the number of the international forces and also the Afghan forces, is going to be so many times more than what was there before.”

Abdul Rahim Wardak, Afghan Minister of Defence⁷³

8 Jun 2006: First-ever meeting of the 37 defence ministers from NATO and non-NATO ISAF troop contributing countries who reconfirm their commitment to expand to the south.

31 Jul 2006: ISAF expands area of operations to six additional provinces in the south of Afghanistan.

4 Oct 2006: ISAF implements Stage 4 of expansion, taking command of the international military forces in eastern Afghanistan from the U.S.-led coalition.

28-29 Nov 2006: Riga Summit.

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72 See http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/speech/2006/speech_04may06.htm

73 Joint news conference with the NATO Secretary General on 8 June 2006 following the first meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Defence Ministers with non-NATO ISAF contributors.

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Gap between national, NATO and host nation agendas, at the same time competing for space against the enemy's info effort	Severe lack of capacity of information-related capabilities in Regional Commands, and alignment of effort with ISAF HQ	Fighting in the South, and whether NATO was 'winning or losing'; 'body count'
Mission expansion /transition to ISAF lead vice Coalition	Coherence between OEF-ISAF and more broadly with Afghans	Force generation and national caveats: two-tier Alliance, with particular focus on Germany
Policy Action Group ('War Cabinet') for President Karzai including StratCom line of effort	Pressure from higher HQs for 'good news' stories	May riots in Kabul Operation Medusa RAF Nimrod crashes, killing 14
Management of Alliance politics vice U.S. distraction re: Iraq	Lack of a top-down strategic narrative	Musa Qala
Managing 24-hr news cycle in first major ground fight in NATO history	Establishing coherence of "Joint Effects": PA/IO/PSYOPS along with 'Fires' within the ISAF HQ	

Context. Lieutenant-General Richards, promoted to four-star general during his tour, was the first NATO commander to have responsibility for the whole of Afghanistan and thus for prosecuting operations in support of security, governance and development, the three NATO lines of operation. When ARRC HQ began arriving in April 2006, ISAF had approximately 10,000 under command, half of these still in Kabul, with little combat capability outside the capital. U.S. forces under OEF numbered about 30,000.

There were high expectations as the ARRC prepared for what was to become the most momentous and challenging tour of the nine commands to that point. The year previous, ISAF HQ had operated pretty much under the international public radar with periodic exceptions related mainly to the deteriorating security situation and the preparations and deployment of NATO forces to the south, which was showing evidence of increased insurgent activity. The ARRC tour was shaping up as a real test of NATO especially in light of the low level of confidence in the latter's ability to take responsibility for the south and east of Afghanistan, by far the most difficult half of the country in which to operate. It would be a litmus test for many nations as to whether the Alliance could adapt and evolve to successfully deal with the new world (dis)order – failure having 'unthinkable' consequences.

A number of key conditions were in place as a foundation for the prospects of a successful StratCom campaign.

The ARRC, built on the UK as a framework nation, was widely regarded as the best Corps HQ in NATO with deeply experienced personnel and an HQ that spent considerable time and effort thinking about ‘influence’, its role in operations, and how to organise the structure and accompanying procedures to achieve the desired degree of coherence and synchronisation of effort. This was a culture borne from operational experience going back to the post-UN, Implementation Force (IFOR) campaign in the Balkans – then led by Lieutenant-General Mike Walker, who would go on to become the UK Chief of Defence – and later in Kosovo with the Kosovo Force (KFOR) under Lieutenant-General Mike Jackson.

The HQ had 18 months to prepare for the Afghanistan mission, a luxury rarely afforded a major HQ and one that allowed considerably more preparation and planning time to refine policies and procedures, and to conduct campaign-specific training. This fortunate situation came about through the direction of a perspicacious new commander – Richards having arrived at the ARRC in January 2005 – and who quickly refocused the effort from that of conventional war fighting.

Richards made his name in no small measure due to his decisive leadership in operations in East Timor and in Sierra Leone, in particular the latter where at considerable risk to his career he orchestrated a commander-led information campaign that was central to the operation and a significant part of the mission’s surprising success.⁷⁴ He was articulate, outgoing and outspoken. “He made it clear that he would be forward-leaning with Public Affairs when he took over the ARRC,” said Major Toby Jackman, a spokesperson and chief media operations for the ISAF tour. “As a brigade commander he had the sapper [engineer] and the gunner permanently in his back pocket, and as a three-star commander it was the legal advisor and his media man...” The commander’s guidance to staff also made clear the view that influence through an effective information campaign would be central to the effort: “My guiding intent is, through our actions and a linked information operation firmly rooted in substance, to reinforce the people of Afghanistan’s belief that long-term peace and growing economic prosperity from which everyone can benefit is possible if they continue to give their government, and its international partners, their support and encouragement.”⁷⁵

74 See General David Richards, "Sierra Leone 2000: Pregnant with Lessons", *British Generals in Blair's Wars* (2013); Richards, *Taking Command* (2014), and Sandy Gall, *War Against the Taliban* (2012).

75 Major-General Chris Brown, "Multinational Command in Afghanistan - 2006: NATO at the Cross-Roads," *British Generals in Blair's Wars* (2013), p. 218.

In the ARRC, a staff grouping called 'Joint Effects' was charged with responsibility to tie together the information functions with the kinetic fires effort and was headed by a general officer. And for the first time NATO deployed a civilian spokesperson. Mark Laity, a former journalist with 11 years as defence correspondent for the BBC and thus familiar to the ARRC, was also uniquely armed with experience in senior communications positions at both NATO and SHAPE. As a spokesperson for the NATO Senior Civilian Representative and concurrently as a media advisor to COMISAF, it was a clever solution to demonstrating that NATO/ISAF was more than a military mission. It also served to more closely tie and align ISAF communications into NATO HQ's public diplomacy efforts as the media pressure against Brussels mounted in concert with the increased fighting and NATO casualties.

Thus before deploying the ARRC had in place as many of the elements important to a successful information campaign as could reasonably be expected: did it make a difference and if so, how?

Organisation of Info Effort. The ARRC brought its long-standing model of integrating the effort of kinetic-based 'fires' along with 'influence' in a construct called Joint Effects, under an O-6 Chief. Brigadier Robert Purdy's tour was the first time that a general-level officer was focused exclusively on the information and influence element of the ISAF campaign. "He was very focused on issues of process and making it work, and soon enough it was a fully operational body," said Laity. Mid-way through the ARRC tour and as part of a regularly scheduled rotation of staff, Brigadier Nugee arrived in theatre to replace Purdy and thence also periodically acted as a military spokesperson, generally when the seriousness of events suggested an officer more senior in rank to the spokesperson was more appropriate.

Lieutenant-Colonel Chris Borneman was a British cavalry officer working in the G7 (exercises) branch in the ARRC helping prepare the HQ for the deployment. As the lead elements headed out, the Chief Public Information Officer was required to postpone his deployment for an extended period to attend to a family emergency leading Richards to tag Borneman as the replacement 48 hours before the latter flew into theatre. It was illustrative of how shallow the pool of experienced Public Affairs-trained senior staff in NATO was, and a lack of confidence in the 'luck of the draw' of the crisis establishment staffing process. In the end it worked well because of the collective experience of the group and long-standing personal relationships particularly within the operational staff and command group where the ability to 'talk the same language' and 'operational credibility' are very important for access, information, or arranging access to the same.

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This was the second time that reporting relationships at ISAF HQ had caused a policy-related stir as efforts continued to evolve the structure to better synchronise the disciplines.

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During pre-deployment preparations the ARRC's Joint Effects Branch reported to Operations with Public Information or PInfo (as it was called until Military Committee policy in Aug 2007 changed it to Public Affairs) reporting direct to the commander. While still in garrison, ARRC looked to shift PInfo into the Joint Effects Branch reporting to Ops “to ensure coherence of what we were doing and what we were saying,” said Jackman. “We were directed

to change this, Joint Force Command Brunssum being concerned this was contrary to NATO policy and might compromise PInfo's direct access to him, so we adjusted. The branch always had direct access to him and we worked closely with the rest of the team through frequent meetings that looked out 30, 60 and 90 days to coordinate joint effects.” This was the second time that reporting relationships at ISAF HQ had caused a policy-related stir as efforts continued to evolve the structure to better synchronise the disciplines – Lieutenant-General Hillier's creation of the Theatre Information Coordinator was the first – and it would not be the last, as General McKiernan would later discover.

While deployed, the Chief Joint Effects reported to COMISAF thru the Chief of Staff with responsibility to integrate the Info Ops, Key Leader Engagement, Public Affairs and PSYOPS effort along with ‘fires’. PSYOPS remained under the command of the Germans who insisted on a direct reporting relationship to COMISAF; this was resolved with Richards who agreed to direct access when required, but that he expected their effort to be coordinated thru Chief Joint Effects. Rightly or wrongly, in a sentiment expressed by (mainly Public Affairs) practitioners in the first nine iterations of ISAF HQs, the CJPOTF continued to be viewed as a mainly ‘independent’ unit producing TV, radio and print products including public security related announcements. Products were reviewed as required and approved with little trouble or fanfare, but there was not a sense that the effort was neatly nested in the overall information effort though there were examples of it.

“There was a lot of room for coordination,” said Major Luke Knittig, the main spokesperson for the tour. “For instance, I used to have PSYOPS come role play Afghan and international reporters at my press conference rehearsals as it helped all of us refine messages.”

Integrating Effort at the HQ. Generating coherency between the media campaign with its strict focus on truth and facts, and the influence campaign including on those Afghan audiences who were supportive of insurgents or could go either way depending on who looked to be winning, was an ongoing effort. The interest, as always, was to guard and protect the credibility of the public information campaign, while at the same time looking to achieve results for the influence effort. “We were careful to separate the work such that no-one from Info Ops could be identified as a spokesperson,” said Knittig.

That was even more challenging in the ARRC, where the Chief Joint Effects’ remit was to oversee the information function and also to wrestle together an integrated effort that harmonised ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ activities, an onerous workload for one officer. This is the only NATO High Readiness Forces HQ to tie together responsibilities for information effect so clearly as this. The kinetic piece “was something that was turning the Command inside out trying to get a handle on,” said Nugee, speaking about the wholesale effort to get the balance right on the battlefield. “If you don’t harness them and make them equal the information operation will always lose out to the ops/kinetic effort. Battle damage assessment is an instant metric: to the operator, if you are looking for immediate effect you go kinetic. How can you be in the OODA [observe, orient, decide, act] loop if you are waiting six months to see if an information operation has been successful? By the same token, the kinetic piece undermines the information campaign because inevitably at some point the wrong person will be killed.”

The potential effects of operations not linked tightly with the Joint Effects group was not intuitively understood by all early on, and negative developments were a catalyst for improvement. For instance “during one activity it became apparent that [Special Forces] had not fully considered the implications of prior public affairs planning, after an operation that they conducted in daylight received a lot of media queries,” said an ARRC officer. “Consequently we were asked to attend their go/no go briefs. I went to these and would advise on the likely public affairs impacts and provide plans in support. A similar situation arose with time sensitive/High Value/High Pay-Off targeting and we provided a similar capability by being incorporated into the time-sensitive targeting team to cover Public Affairs.”

The Kabul riots in May 2006 that killed 14 Afghans also served as an important milestone “strengthening the working group between the Afghan ministries of defence and information, the UNAMA spokesperson and our media operations shop,” said Knittig.

A headquarters, even a national one or one based on a framework nation with experienced staff, is hardly a homogenous mix of like-minded individuals, particularly when it comes to facilitating the information and influence effort. “There were evangelists, believers and non-believers,” said Borneman. “Into that mix pour individual personalities. And that bakes the cake. Having a civilian media adviser was a big plus – the brigadiers and above essentially dined amongst themselves so much business got done around the table. Mark Laity was deemed to be a one-star equivalent and therefore was at the “top table” – a mere lieutenant-colonel would not be. That gave us an important ear and voice in addition to that of the Chief Joint Effects.”

Coordination of Effort with HQ(s). The NATO HQ Media Operations Centre within the Spokesperson/Press & Media office at NATO HQ had concurrently stood up originally with a modest force of one official but had been successful at obtaining more through staff re-allocations with the Public Diplomacy Division and voluntary national contributions. This was the genesis for the start of a campaign to focus the Afghanistan-related communications effort within the political HQ in Brussels. By this time, SHAPE Public Info was also fully engaged though with one eye on Afghanistan and another on the range of other missions (such as KFOR) and activities (such as the NATO Response Force) that also drew serious Alliance attention at the time. Having an experienced civilian familiar with NATO communications deployed forward who could speak for the NATO Senior Civilian Representative served to link these efforts neatly together. As such, NATO HQ-SHAPE-ISAF HQ working relations during this period are widely described as excellent. Events were too fast-moving though, for anything other than ‘direct liaison’ between NATO HQ in Brussels ISAF HQ. The operational, four-star HQ at JFC Brunssum – ISAF’s higher HQ – was regularly bypassed and struggled to execute its assigned responsibilities during day-to-day operations.⁷⁶

Relevant information from ISAF’s Regional Commands was coordinated mainly via Situation Reports from all levels which proved to be of variable quality as new units and personalities from different nations speaking multiple

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76 “The fighting between SHAPE, Brunssum and ISAF was continuous,” said Major-General David Fraser, the first Commander of RC(S). “This did not help. Brunssum was seen both above and below as simply a force generator and having no role afterwards. I witnessed it several times and this permeated throughout the staff.” [Personal exchange].

languages came and left theatre. Regional Commands were perennially and in some cases seriously under-resourced (see Chapter 4.9, Realities of the Information Campaign at RC(South)), with nations focusing their information-related capabilities and assets at national brigade and Task Force levels, where the main media embedding effort was happening.

The NATO coalition effort was regularly demonstrating the challenges inherent to unity and coherence required for success against an insurgency. The coordination of information release was tested early in the tour as it had been for virtually every preceding command. “There were clear tensions, perhaps best demonstrated by the example of London [Ministry of Defence] believing it could pull our chain because ISAF IX was a UK-led headquarters and not NATO, who owned us,” recalled one ARRC officer. “Now multiply that by the number of nations represented. It was always difficult balancing competing needs of different stakeholders.”

However, the presence of national contingent commanders in the HQ could facilitate fast information clearance and support for an initial release of information such as when two Italian soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb within a week of the ARRC taking command. “It was quickly decided that I would break the news to the wire services in an interview and it was easy to rapidly clear our lines with the deputy commander ISAF who was the senior Italian officer. I had a similar situation later when the Dutch lost an F-16,” said an ARRC media operations officer.

Not all nations were as amenable to the manner and timing of how to release information that would garner headlines ‘back home’, particularly the UK and Canada who, in addition to the U.S., were bearing the brunt of casualties in the south. “We were careful to protect personal information related to casualty and fatality notification, but at the same time tried to be the first to get any releasable facts out,” said Jackman.

Even with broad agreement on the facts of ‘what happened’ in a particular incident, that did not always guarantee consensus on *how* to use the information. One dilemma that quickly generated considerable debate for instance, was the ‘Taliban body count’, particularly in the early days and weeks of fighting and when NATO forces were taking casualties. As a measure of success it was widely agreed that it had very limited application, the actual effect on the ground being the key variable.

But to say nothing and facilely respond that “NATO does not conduct body counts” would have suggested that battle damage assessment was not occurring though it certainly was.

It would have also made it more difficult to refute claims by Taliban that inadvertent civilian casualties caused by NATO had occurred. The Taliban information campaign was active and communicating their version throughout, significantly underestimating the impact on their forces and wildly overestimating NATO casualty figures. “Saying nothing made it look like they were defeating us in combat,” said Laity who regularly briefed media as a spokesperson from theatre. “Them killing us was a measure of effectiveness for them, but somehow it should not be for us? The fact is that Afghans viewed killing the enemy as a matter of effect. How could we have said we were winning if we didn’t come out and say it? To do otherwise would have made it appear that we were losing every battle and have been a gift for the Taliban propaganda effort.”⁷⁷ The spectre of Vietnam hung over every conversation of the issue where ‘body count’ was widely used to ill effect. No one wanted to go there and even though that was not the intent, some nations and senior officers were still upset. It was a discussion that elevated to the Military Committee and North Atlantic Council where the majority in both forums allowed that the approach taken in theatre was measured, balanced and effective. It was another early signal and an example of the real-life information consequences of being in combat that had not been fully exercised to that point.⁷⁸

Regional Commands, and the OEF. Practitioners from the ARRC were agreed that it was difficult to effect coherence between ISAF HQ and the Regional Commands that were particularly prone to prioritise the national information effort above that of NATO HQ/ISAF.⁷⁹ And “it took a while for us to understand the different contributing nations’ Public Affairs capabilities and how they were using them ... A number of nations had embedded [media] that were in place prior to our arrival. So accreditation and registration had to be redone which was invariably unpopular with journalists who had been in theatre for some time and given that we were the 9th HQ ISAF iteration,”⁸⁰ said Jackman.

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77 Interview.

78 The flip side is that ISAF did not initially ‘count’ its own casualties, instead deferring to individual nations to provide figures. This resulted in media aggregating the numbers, making for confusing reports as agencies clamoured for an “official figure” and awkward commentary about NATO not knowing. In time, media operations was able to establish a figure and work it up for approval. As ever, agreeing on ‘numbers’ proved to be one of the most challenging endeavours, as specific incidents such as a mine strike outside Kabul airport sparked debate about whether that constituted casualty attributed to combat.

79 This is an observation that could be applied to every field HQ throughout the entirety of the mission, albeit in varying degrees. It is a consequence in part of media being particularly interested in events when a commander from the same nation is in place. Of the various information-related capabilities, senior staff from Public Affairs tend to be hand-picked by, and from the same nation as commanders, so the appearance on the surface is that the effort is nationally focused. Still, some regional and ISAF commands were blatantly so, to the overall detriment of the NATO narrative. Other HQs made considerably more effort to promote a ‘corporate’ NATO viewpoint; the ARRC was in the latter camp.

80 Interview.

The change from exclusively U.S.-focused counter-terrorism operations in the south and east to one of two distinct missions including the NATO security-governance-development effort did not sit well with American forces about to transition roles by placing forces under NATO command. “I am not certain that [the commander of US forces] Ben Freakley yet has his heart in it; everything about him suggests resentment and absolute focus on so-called ‘kinetic’ solutions ... He thinks we can defeat the Taliban principally through killing more of them,” recalled General Richards.⁸¹ At the time, many NATO nations including Canada, Germany and the Netherlands still did not even widely acknowledge the situation as a counter-insurgency campaign even if some with ISAF were contributing Special Forces to the OEF mission at the same time.

“It was very difficult to get information about OEF activities,” said one practitioner, though “this did improve *within a few months*.” Thus, it remained a challenge to manage the two narratives of the U.S. Global War on Terrorism and the Afghan/ISAF counter-insurgency campaign, the latter not well understood to start with and the difference – one force overtly from NATO nations but not called NATO and the other force overtly from NATO nations and called NATO – made little sense to member nation audiences let alone to Afghans.

Narrative. At this juncture of the mission there were few common, agreed lines and no comprehensive strategic narrative to draw on but also competing campaigns from the UN, OEF and ISAF, as well as troop contributing nations. With little being ‘pushed down’ from NATO HQ, ISAF HQ ended up drawing extensively from the commander’s campaign plan and by reading what senior NATO HQ officials were saying – communications planning based on NATO HQ public soundbites. The initiative and push by Richards to create a Policy Action Group (PAG), or ‘War Cabinet’ for President Karzai including representatives from a wide variety of ministries with sub-groups for Intelligence; Security Operations; Outreach Reconstruction and Development; and Strategic Communications helped over time to better harmonise ISAF-Afghan government messaging, such as there was. It was a serious effort to take forward ISAF V’s initial work at Afghan capacity building, as well as a more robust effort to draw together the rest of the people speaking about the mission on behalf of the various international organisations. “We needed to try to stop contradicting each other, to stop the information fratricide,” said Laity. “Building effective personal relations with others outside ISAF was key to trying to deconflict our information efforts.”

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At this juncture of the mission there were few common, agreed lines and no comprehensive strategic narrative to draw on but also competing campaigns from the UN, OEF and ISAF, as well as troop contributing nations.

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Many voices can contribute to, reinforce, or even change a narrative. This was the case when the UK Minister of Defence John Reid during an April 2006 visit to Afghanistan, remarked that the UK was “in the south to help and protect the Afghan people to reconstruct their economy and democracy. We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years’ time without firing one shot.”⁸²

Taken literally the remark was a fair sentiment, but it was not the last time in this tour

nuance would be lost in translation. As an ARRC officer at the briefing recalls, “there was an audible intake of breath from the audience, many of whom had significant Afghan experience. No one doubted that the arrival of the British in Helmand would lead to a quite significant reaction from the Taliban. Following the press conference we all reviewed our own recording of it in shock.”⁸³

As the campaign progressed through Operation Medusa in the fall and into the lead up to the Riga Conference in November 2006, it was patently obvious that the reconstruction and development-focused messaging did not square with the security reality on the ground, particularly in the south. Tensions were on full display regularly in media headlines and on TV as the fighting intensified and NATO started taking casualties in greater numbers. Canadian political leaders were not alone but were particularly vocal in mounting a full court public press on what they saw as the shortcomings of other nations in the Alliance in making troops available in the south. Germany bore the brunt of Allied criticism for the various restrictions or caveats on the use of their deployed military. David Fraser, then a brigadier-general and in charge of RC(South) at the time said, “Op Medusa demonstrated the absolute failure of NATO with the lack of support from nations. If not for the U.S. and UK, Medusa might have failed and Canada might be still talking about this operation like the Dutch talk about Srebrenica.”⁸⁴

82 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4935532.stm>

83 Interview.

84 Personal exchange.

Many nations were keen to provide the appearance if not the substance of doing more to answer NATO's call for more forces, or to lessen caveats on the use of their forces. Some nations regularly chose to combine the number of forces deployed to the OEF and ISAF which added to the general confusion of mission separation. Nor were nations transparent with their force numbers or how they chose to depict their forces. In the UK for instance, 16 Air Assault Brigade was touted as the capability being deployed when the reality was that it was a reinforced Battle Group, representing a much smaller contribution. Force generation conferences and NATO Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministerials took on a new-found importance as media who followed and reported on NATO paid closer attention to regularly scheduled meetings that heretofore hadn't merited interest or coverage.

This included the NATO chiefs of defence who met as a group three times a year. "As we progress through our deployment into the southern region, we have discovered that the resistance from opposing militant forces has been more intense than we had anticipated," said then-Chairman of NATO's Military Committee General Ray Henault to media in the fall of 2006, just weeks ahead of the Riga Summit. "I reiterated to nations to send all the people and the capability they agreed were necessary and that had been signed up to."⁸⁵ Nations agreed to an Afghanistan-related force generation conference shortly thereafter, and the fixation on troop numbers was well and truly set in. The effort to reconcile what nations said they would do and what they actually did became a major focus of communications. Everyone had underestimated the Taliban and their ability to fight. It called for an intensity of messaging that caught NATO off-guard.

The challenge of working in a consensus-based organisation showed in several other key issues garnering political and public attention at the time because of policy dissonance and thus fractured messaging. The counter-narcotics effort led by the British but outside the auspices of ISAF was one such area as nations wrestled with whether to spray, support eradication efforts by Afghan officials, help introduce alternative crops, or a combination of the three. In turn, nations tried to come to terms with the extent to which their military forces would be directly or indirectly engaged in the agreed effort.

Characterising the role of Pakistan in the conflict was highly problematic. The impact on the ISAF mission of a porous Afghan-Pakistan border allowing Taliban freedom of movement had obvious military implications and was a subject that would not unreasonably be within the remit of the military command to have a view about and speak to.

It was a delicate balance though, knowing that every utterance on the matter would be subject to quick and immediate political response from the Afghan and Pakistan governments. It was also not lost on ISAF HQ that NATO HQ was trying hard to say as little publicly on the matter as it could.

Striking a balance between characterising the overall situation in an overly optimistic tone or with grim realism was another no-win scenario opening military spokespersons to charges of being either delusional or defeatist. In mid-December 2006 in a discussion at a Policy Action Group meeting, Richards disagreed with the view of the American ambassador who was suggesting that ISAF “should warn people of a difficult time ahead next year. I said that we must talk up achievements and prospects for now, while planning among ourselves for an upsurge in violence again next year, or people will seriously question whether they are right to support us. [President Karzai] agreed.”⁸⁶ It was hard to settle on a choice of words that all could agree to.⁸⁷ The fact that other international voices were largely absent from public view also did not help NATO.

Senior HQ Fixation on the Headlines. General Richards took the NATO ISAF political-military centre of gravity – ‘maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance’ – to heart. “He was clear that we would lose the war if we lost the backing of Western countries,” said Nugee. “It was his biggest interest every morning, reviewing the whole of the Western press.” True to form, the COMISAF was a frequent commentator in public in an effort to bolster public understanding of an effort that was poorly understood, even within NATO circles in Brussels. “There is very little confidence in NATO’s political leadership; if they lose it in me too, we are pretty well doomed ... I have to inspire confidence and optimism or this thing will go tits up,” Richards wrote in his autobiography.⁸⁸

Issues related to media coverage of comments by the commander during the ARRC tour were a significant irritant to NATO HQ and to Richards, and he spent considerable time addressing how the senior headquarters were reacting to events at the time, and how the media campaign affected his command and thinking. The reaction to the more serious of the episodes reflected two key tensions afoot in a high-intensity, high-stakes and high-visibility military campaign.

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86 Richards (2014), p. 267.

87 It became a considerable source of wry amusement to long-serving practitioners as each spring from 2006 contained the same NATO messaging and sound bites like "this year is our year", "yes, there will be a spring offensive this year – ours", "this is the most critical/important year of the campaign" in an effort to demonstrate fortitude and perseverance.

88 Ibid., p. 226.

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General Richards was telling people something they didn't know and didn't like. Three years later, it was OK for General McChrystal to say the same thing but by then he was telling people something they knew but had just not wanted to admit.

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First was the fundamental difference of understanding between those actually on the ground fighting the campaign and those 'managing' the political-military effort from Europe. Second, the fall-out put into stark relief the political risk facing commanders in the midst of campaigns; if one is not seen, then how can one expect to be heard; and, if one is seen and it should go wrong, then expect retribution.

Public communications in such a volatile environment

is a real risk and in his genuine desire to build greater awareness, Richards sometimes made remarks that while true, did not favour the circumstances at the time and were controversial enough to threaten his very command. It is a testament to his talent and otherwise adroit ability to communicate a boldness of vision that allowed everyone to work through tough times. It was an early sign and signal that comments to media would feature as prominently in senior-level dialogue as did discussions of the actual conduct of the campaign and 'how to do better'. General Richards was telling people something they didn't know and didn't like. Three years later, it was OK for General McChrystal to say the same thing but by then he was telling people something they knew but had just not wanted to admit.

Trouble started early. In July 2006, the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper published a piece reporting on comments by the COMISAF at a speech the day before to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London, an important and favourite public outreach stop for NATO generals. It was a little more than a week before the south would transfer under NATO command. The headline was that Richards had described the situation in the country as 'close to anarchy', "with feuding foreign agencies and unethical private security companies compounding problems caused by local corruption," and that Western forces "were short of equipment and were 'running out of time' if they were going to meet the expectations of the Afghan people."⁸⁹

In his remarks Richards had characterised *how* the groups were operating was close to anarchy and that more work was needed to work toward common aims. It was another too-fine nuance and one lost on superior headquarters.

The calls came in, including from retired General Rupert Smith whose “firmest suggestion was to keep a lower media profile ... [but] I think Rupert’s advice may be wrong; I need to drive opinion, especially when there is so much confusion in Afghanistan as well as in many national capitals,” wrote Richards.⁹⁰ On Monday, almost three days after the delivered remarks, SACEUR General Jones was next, sharing on the phone that the Secretary General was “very angry”, prompting Richard’s diary note, “Any thought for all the good we have done for a rather supine organisation that in most people’s views had ‘lost’ the media battle before we arrived?”⁹¹

Other tempests followed including a mid-October briefing to the Pentagon Press Corps. The Coalition effort “was not sufficient to achieve a sustained effect” and the Taliban had been exploiting this, said Richards, which the media took to mean as criticism that it was the U.S. who had short-changed the mission. This provoked another call from the SACEUR “who had not taken the trouble to read the transcript, had been got at by the Dutchman [the NATO Secretary General] and Rummy [Rumsfeld] and clearly had not tried to defend me or place the interview into context, either in terms of what I actually said or in terms of the overall success of our media and general campaign. He essentially, has banned me from speaking to the media without his consent.”⁹² This was followed shortly by a letter “directing that I am essentially not to engage with the media without his express authority ... it’s back me or sack me time I think ...”⁹³

The reality in modern-day military operations, and certainly in evidence in all the other ISAF HQ commands, is that of the communication disciplines, the media campaign dominates the Command Group’s time and effort. “Two years I have now dedicated to this job, shouldering a huge amount of responsibility and influence,” wrote Richards. “I have received no real direction from my country and, it often seems, precious little support.

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90 Ibid., p. 219.

91 Ibid., p. 220. "Then a phone call from General Back [JFCN Commander and General Richard's next direct in the chain of command] but he brought up the f***ing Guardian issue just as I was forgetting it...I know what it will lead to – a belief that I am a good operational soldier but not suitable for the political complexities of four-star rank. I would like to see them try to juggle all these pressures and egos and still actually achieve something worth having as opposed to being the unadventurous, cautious crew that most of them clearly are."

92 Ibid., p. 251.

93 Ibid., p. 258.

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It was as good a demonstration as any that the same amount of staff effort can go into unsuccessful efforts as successful ones, a fact that is not well captured in performance metrics.

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Indeed, I usually hear from the leadership only when the last Supreme Allied Commander or the Dutchman complain about a media issue.”⁹⁴ Richards makes no mention of PSYOPS in his book or the use of influence to change behaviours, a not-uncommon occurrence in senior military leaders’ biographies, and Afghanistan-related literature generally.⁹⁵

The expansion of the mission throughout Afghanistan was also a

catalyst to build and strengthen personal and professional relations with Afghan media, a critical target audience and one that was beginning to show signs of formative development. The effort at the ARRC started with bringing several in to support the mission rehearsal exercise, and was followed with targeted briefings including invitations to the “Deans” of the press corps, as well as ‘convergence’ dinners with the COMISAF and senior Afghan officials including Ashraf Ghani who became President in late 2014. The effort paid real dividends with a significant uptick in the quantity and quality of reporting in Afghan media about the campaign.

What was being reported in Afghan media was increasingly being picked up by Western media sharp enough to pay attention. Brigadier Nugee recalls a 2006 ‘year-end-review’ briefing geared to Afghan journalists in Kabul. Following an exchange about how ISAF was working to prevent motorcycle suicide bombers an Afghan journalist asked, “What’s the worst thing NATO has done this year?” “I thought carefully about this,” recalled Nugee, “a thousand potential answers going through my head in the moment, and said ‘too many civilians are being killed in Afghanistan. The Taliban are killing too many. And ISAF has killed too many.’ The headline the next day was ‘NATO Admits Murder.’

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94 Ibid., p. 267.

95 The notable exceptions are Mackay and Tatham (2011), and Major-General Mackay, "Helmand 2007-2008: Behavioural Conflict - From General to Strategic Corporal," in *British Generals in Blair's Wars* (2013).

The four-star at Brunssum called down to say ‘fire him.’ Karzai called to say, ‘finally, somebody understands the issue, give him a medal.’ You have a choice between a completely anodyne, non-committal answer with no chance to cause offence to any audience. Or to say what you think, to say what’s right. The half that do get it are a better audience to reach than the half who don’t get it.”⁹⁶ The mission was putting short shrift to the notion, of those who actually still subscribed to it, that it was possible to deliver different messages to segmented ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ audiences without overlap or other audiences noticing.

Educating media both international and Afghan was a major effort; many of the former were new to the notion of combat and what it entails, and many of the latter were new to journalism and covering conflict from that perspective. Access to NATO activities was enhanced, with Afghan radio and TV now being able to accompany NATO patrols. Some major outlets maintained a regular presence in theatre (including BBC, Associated Press and Agence France-Presse) while other major outlets did not (including Reuters and CNN) necessitating greater effort at media relations proper including registration and lengthy background information sessions frequently one-on-one in an effort to set tactical events into some semblance of operational and strategic context.

Attempting to correct factual errors in media coverage was a regular, ongoing effort that did not always pay desired dividends, but did so more often than not. It was a considerable effort that took time, and often days or even weeks for the issue to die or calm in spite of efforts. “We had the ability to address problems, but catching a bolted horse is far harder than keeping it stabled,” said Jackman.

For instance, a national-level UK reporter contacted the ARRC about an allegation of civilian deaths in Musa Qala but it was several weeks before the circumstances could be pieced together, including the possibility of civilians being attacked by the Taliban. “Internally I was working with ops to verify information as we received it from the reporter,” said an officer. “He sent me the piece ahead of publication which showed due diligence on our part and we felt it was balanced. However, the story was edited heavily in London ... and was very unfavourable in final print. It was rather an uncomfortable morning briefing the next day with General Richards, but he was pretty sanguine about it.”⁹⁷ It was as good a demonstration as any that the same amount of staff effort can go into unsuccessful efforts as successful ones, a fact that is not well captured in performance metrics.

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96 Interview.

97 The reporter apparently left the offending news organisation that day for another outlet.

Effect. “Given his success as a brigadier in Sierra Leone, there was an expectation by General Richards of similar success in Afghanistan,” said Nugee. “The conditions were considerably different between the two operations, but given that I was Chief Joint Effects, every morning he would be looking at me, wanting that the effort had achieved greater effect.”⁹⁸ Of course, that is particularly difficult when good things don’t happen (including the failed counter-narcotics effort, and limited army and police training) and when bad things happen (including Op Medusa, the Nimrod crash, and the British withdrawal from Musa Qala).

The media analysis section was confirming the impact of ARRC’s messaging from a very wide range of outlets covering the vast majority of key audiences, and “I can only recall a few times when a piece did not have our messaging in it,” said Jackman. “The reason for this is that we were honest, we genuinely tried to get all relevant information out and to give the media access. We sensed that our approach was working as our messaging began to gain traction in what was being reported.”

The effort was rewarded by better and more contextualised coverage including more obvious pick-up of NATO spokespersons’ commentary. Allowing Afghan and international media access to foot patrols resulted in substantial media play, and ARRC-generated ‘B-roll’ footage was used “more than I expected,” recalled Knittig. Considerable effort and time was also spent countering Taliban stories particularly with Al Jazeera which had a local bureau run by Afghans, and with whom the Taliban were quick to speak. “Within three months, Al Jazeera was ringing us up to ask for our version of events before releasing news, which we judged a great success,” said Borneman.⁹⁹

ARRC media staff also carefully reached out to the Afghan Islamic Press in Peshawar after they would run the Taliban spokesman’s comments and not ISAF’s. Many late-night conversations ensued and “they eventually got comfortable enough to send an emissary to meet face to face,” recalled an officer, “and started going to our website and reaching out for comment.” The HQ had also been contacted and received an email from a ‘Taliban spokesperson’ and managed to open a dialogue “directing him to our website to get accurate details, and after a while even the Taliban statements began to lead with information from our website,” recalled another officer.¹⁰⁰

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98 Interview.

99 Interview.

100 Interview.

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There was much angst in national capitals and Brussels over what they concluded was one-sided reporting. If not always to NATO's favour it was on the whole a fair characterisation of the reality on the ground. The news was bad. No amount of 'good news stories' was about to change that.

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In an examination of the broad swaths of reporting at the time, one cannot help but be struck by the general overall balance and broad strokes of military messaging that permeates the coverage. Everyone was wrestling with the reality of dealing with brutality of sights, sounds, images and drama of the first ground combat of NATO's history. It was war, even if few nations would admit it, and it was being reported. There was much angst in national capitals and Brussels

over what they concluded was one-sided reporting. If not always to NATO's favour it was on the whole a fair characterisation of the reality on the ground. The news was bad. No amount of 'good news stories' was about to change that.

Take-Aways/Observations. The ARRC tour offers a useful and compelling example of many of the various challenges and tensions inherent in strategic communications within the Afghanistan mission and indeed for any contemporary NATO military campaign. These were not particular to the ARRC but were found in all of the various ISAF commands though many show themselves vigorously for the first time, and include:

Communication and Information Management

- In a contested deployment, particularly one with “boots on the ground”, the media campaign will dominate the work and time of the Command Group over other information-related disciplines.
- *Supporting the information needs of higher HQs consumes a lot of oxygen.* The focus by higher headquarters on news reports is a testament to the continuing power of media to affect and influence a day's agenda, discussion and sometimes the direction of a campaign. This is a considerable distraction to deployed headquarters and if not managed aggressively can seriously impact the command climate.

- Coordinating the release of ‘national-related’ information from NATO sources that is bound to have domestic political effect in troop contributing nations is an every-day challenge, and demands an effective media operations capability by strategic HQ staff to help effect liaison with nations.
- Even with full knowledge and facts of a situation, people on the same team can have quite different views about the choice of information to release and what is going to have best effect, the competing views on the ‘Taliban body count’ being just one example.
- From a command perspective, PSYOPS as a distinct function ‘did its own thing’ with little direct oversight and course correction, excepting product review.
- Subordinate HQs in NATO are not high on the manning priority for nations who fill national needs first, then ‘strategic’ fills at senior-level NATO HQs. Subordinate HQs did not necessarily share the same policies, procedures and depth of mission-specific training as higher, commanding HQs.
- Direct access to the commander matters more than rank in the management of day-to-day communications. Rank though, matters a great deal within the staff when deciding on competing priorities for information, resources and tasking authorities.
- There is often no substitute for a critical mass of resources. The best operational plans embracing the correct strategy aren’t very effective absent a means to communicate across all channels.

For Consideration/At Issue. The experience of this tour points to three questions of interest for communication and information practitioners and operators alike:

- With the breadth, range and volume of activity in the information environment, how reasonable is it to expect that one officer can coordinate and direct ‘effects’ across the whole spectrum of capabilities in the influence domain, including with kinetic ‘fires’?
- What is the appropriate background for the officer tasked to lead the Strategic Communications/ information effects effort – an experienced and practised communicator, or an experienced and practised operator?
- Does military communications benefit from a ‘civilian filter’? That is, an experienced but non-military voice whose career is not beholden to formal military reporting lines (a formula that also worked particularly well for the ARRC in Bosnia in 1996)?

CHAPTER 4.9

REALITIES OF THE INFORMATION CAMPAIGN AT REGIONAL COMMAND (SOUTH), 2006-2008¹⁰¹

‘Complicated’ may be the kindest description for the chain of command in Afghanistan. While long hours of pontification about strategy took place in the rarefied atmospheres of NATO Summits, foreign affairs and defence Ministerial meetings, in the Military Committee, in national capitals, and at embassies in Kabul. At ISAF HQ, it was at the brigade and battle group level where the ‘rubber really hit the road’. Here was where the campaign for hearts and mind, for credibility and for influence took place. Here is where soldiers met and dealt with Afghans, where the fight with insurgents took place, and where media embedded; in short, where the political rhetoric met up with the reality on the ground.

This section provides some insight into the challenges of prosecuting the ISAF information effort from the perspective of one regional command, RC (South) during 2006-2008 – one of the most significant places and periods in the entire campaign. ISAF forces were moving into the region for the first time where they confronted a renewed insurgency head-on, having to make do before the force build-up that came later under Generals McKiernan, McChrystal and Petraeus. Though RC (East) was also the scene of major fighting, the strength of the insurgency in RC (South) with Kandahar as its main focus of effort and Helmand province remaining problematic, resulted in this region being the focus of the most attention and eventually resources over the course of the campaign.

The area of operations, before being split into RC (South) and (South-West) in 2009 in part to assist dealing with the significant influx of mainly American ‘surge’ NATO forces, was 600 by 800 kilometres at its widest points, more than four times the size of the Netherlands. Insurgent forces had virtually complete freedom of movement outside the major population centres and across the border with Pakistan. It had been agreed by the three major troop contributing nations at the time to rotate regional command amongst them. Canadian Brigadier-General David Fraser became the first NATO ISAF commander in the south in February 2006, including for the Op Medusa effort: in November 2006 Dutch Major-General Ton van Loon assumed command; in May 2007, British Major-General Jacko Page; and in February 2008, Canadian Major-General Marc Lessard.

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 101 The information for this section draws mainly from exchanges with four senior public affairs staff who collectively served more than two years in theatre at RC (South) over the 2006-08 period.

The South Heats Up: February 2006 - Fall 2006

As of February 2006, RC (South) HQ took over from an American Airborne Brigade that had deployed almost a year earlier in support of Operation Enduring Freedom but had thinned out with minimal information-related capability functionality remaining. The only handover “was a week with a captain who had been part of the Info Ops group,” recalled Major Scott Lundy, the RC (South) Chief Public Information Officer (CPIO) at the time. “There was no handover from anyone in Public Affairs or PSYOPS. Any significant activities of that sort occurred prior to our arrival from the U.S. headquarters in Bagram” [north of Kabul, and about 550 kms from Kandahar]. Though forces from NATO countries had been operating in the area for about four years by then, it was still a new mission for NATO and in many respects a first rotation, putting a premium on composite training during the pre-deployment phase.

The NATO Public Information team consisted of a trained Public Affairs major (from Canada) as the chief, two junior officers (a captain from the Netherlands and a lieutenant from Estonia), and four photo technicians (three from Canada and one from the Netherlands). Mid-tour a junior officer from the UK was also assigned. The Dutch officer’s tour lasted three months and the individual was not replaced. The junior officers all had public affairs-related instruction and while motivated, lacked related training or experience in rank to act as a deputy. The RC(South) Info Ops cell consisted of a Canadian infantry (acting) major and from time to time, was assisted by a reserve U.S. junior officer. There were no integrated PSYOPS assets. The pressure to keep the regional HQ small meant there was no inherent capability at RC (South) to backfill in the event of the section chief’s absence from the office, and relief had to be cobbled together including assistance where possible from national command elements, from ISAF HQ, and *in extremis* by the Info Ops major.

“The area of operations was an intense combat zone with frequent fire fights between NATO-led forces and insurgents throughout the year, countless Improvised Explosive Device (IED) strikes, numerous NATO casualties, and several thousand Afghan deaths including many hundreds of Taliban fighters starting from the moment I arrived in February,” said Lundy. “We issued at least 80 news releases and as many as 100, and we conducted several hundred telephone interviews, typically working from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., seven days a week for the entire tour.” It was high tempo, long hours and little respite for all staff.

The UK, U.S. and Canadian national command elements were much better off from a staffing perspective with the Canadians, arguably the 'richest' of them, having deployed with a major and captain at their national command element, a captain at their battle group and a captain at the Provincial Reconstruction Team. Though all were trained and experienced public affairs officers, the operating environment was new, particularly for those with no operational experience or combat arms training now faced with the realities of modern, busy, full-spectrum operations in full view of embedded media, in the volatile and highly unpredictable situation that was southern Afghanistan at the time.

Media interest was very nationally focused and incidents such as the crash of the UK Nimrod aircraft, the ambush of a French Special Forces unit, or a 'blue-on-blue' incident involving an A-10 and the Canadians was covered in great detail, driven by the major troop contributing nations' embedded media. Providing support to individual nations was a constant feature of the workday, particularly in the early days of casualty notification. For instance, when Canadian soldiers were killed, ISAF HQ looked to immediately issue a news release announcing that a NATO soldier had died in the Province. National authorities pressed hard for a short delay or at a minimum to have the release say RC(South) since Canadian media would automatically assume 'one of theirs' had died if Kandahar province was mentioned, putting great pressure on the notification system back home. The eight-and-a-half-hour time difference between Kandahar and Ottawa or Washington did not favour NATO forces as any incident meant even more extended hours for RC(S) staff dealing with North American-based media.

Early on, the need to synchronise the RC(South) PIO team's activities with those of the major troop contributing nations was identified, and reps from each participated in regular coordination meetings. In addition, "ISAF HQ fully supported our efforts to inform various audiences be they local, national and international of what was happening in our area of operations," said Lundy. "There were occasions when I'm certain some ISAF HQ staff wondered what we were doing but I felt there was a high degree of trust and support built on professional and personal connections between the two HQs and their PIO teams."

The communication campaign, while resource challenged, was also a major focus of effort for everyone in the headquarters. "The chief of staff was from the UK Army and a former UN spokesperson. He fully appreciated the significant role the communications team plays in modern military operations," said Lundy. "The Info Ops officer worked in lock-step with me. We also enjoyed the full support of the operations chief and the entire tactical operations centre team." Senior staff were informed in near-real

time of significant media-related developments often face-to-face, and the commander, chief of staff and chief of operations were briefed frequently with the CPIO as one of a handful of officers who met with the commander twice daily at 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. to discuss current and near-future operations and activities.

The PIO and Info Ops workspaces were side-by-side which greatly facilitated the coordination of effort. In a practical division of the limited labour on hand, Public Information generally led on media requests from national and international reporters operating from Kabul, Kandahar or other Afghan cities, neighbouring countries and from NATO troop-contributing nations. Interviews were almost exclusively conducted in English. In turn, Info Ops generally led the effort on media requests from Kandahar-based Afghan reporters, delivering messages intended to create an effect on the ground to enable RC(South) operations. Normally public affairs would handle requests from Afghan reporters so the situation at this period was a NATO anomaly – an exigency driven by an understaffed public affairs staff satisfying the huge demand from national and international media. The type and quality of information was similar but the tone, emphasis and weighting of facts was different given the target audiences.

For instance, in media interviews with national and international reporters following an IED strike or suicide bombing, the Public Information team first described the operations NATO soldiers were engaged in when they were attacked to counter any impression with audiences in troop contributing nations that the NATO casualties had been incurred in vain. “We also emphasised the cost such attacks had on Afghans, and described the attackers as callous, cruel and self-centred,” said Lundy. “We underlined the fact that NATO forces were operating at the request of the legitimate Karzai government, and working beside Afghan army and police units.”

In trying to convince Afghans that the Taliban should not be supported or tolerated, messaging by the Info Ops team with Afghan media at the local and regional levels first highlighted the total disregard of human life by the Afghan attackers. “To the extent possible, we called on local and regional leaders to do what they could to thwart these deadly activities and make Taliban fighters unwelcome in their communities,” said Lundy. “We also emphasised the role *their* army and *their* police played in our operations and that they were working alongside NATO forces to dislodge Taliban fighters from *their* communities.” In addition, staff frequently coordinated with Afghan army and police units to participate in joint appearances and to encourage their leaders to conduct media interviews with local and regional Afghan reporters.



*Canadian troops patrolling near the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) building in Kandahar, 2008.
Photo: ISAF/NATO*

Afghans who had been working as ‘fixers’ for international news agencies started finding themselves promoted and working as local reporters for the new Afghan radio, TV and print media agencies that proliferated throughout Kandahar Province during this time. It was normal for ‘local media’ to call the office within a half hour of an incident, typically looking for confirmation of the Taliban’s claims about the number of ISAF forces killed and the number of ‘tanks’ (any vehicle, armoured or otherwise) destroyed. Info Ops was actively employed to address in a more timely fashion the Taliban’s use of the Internet. “I gave the officer my intent, and clear instructions to be factual, with the desired effect of getting our message out faster than they could. We achieved this effect when the Taliban criticised the media for listening to us,” said then-Brigadier-General Fraser, the RC (S) Commander.¹⁰²

“We saw early on that the Taliban spokespersons were being quoted in the second paragraph of most stories and our context was either absent or much later in the story,” said Major Daryl Morrell, who worked in the public affairs office. “We started to provide more details on what actually happened based on the nine-line reports that went to the ops centre. At the time, concerns about the accuracy of reporting and showing that the Taliban were being untruthful were more important than operational security concerns about battle damage

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102 Personal exchange.

assessment. In the digital age there is no such thing as local media,” said Morrell. It was a good call, and local reporting began to represent the ISAF perspective more regularly, followed through in international coverage that drew from local sources.

Several interpreters were assigned to the Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) team, and were frequently called upon to facilitate media interviews with Afghan journalists and interpret Afghan newspaper and radio stories. The CIMIC team’s interpreters, overseen by Info Ops, monitored local radio and newspaper reporting and provided daily reports. The Public Information team created dozens of Google news alerts to help gather relevant national and international news stories, with ISAF HQ and various national public affairs shops also sharing media monitoring reports. Absent an assessment capability, “it was difficult to gain a clear and comprehensive understanding of the media environment from all of these disparate and incomplete pieces,” recalled Lundy, “though we did what we could to synthesise information from this and other sources, including intelligence reports.”

Readying for another Taliban Spring Offensive: October 2006 - Summer 2007

The Dutch commander, in place by November 2006, deployed with a considerably smaller HQ than its RC (South) counterparts would, and like many HQs was experiencing war for the first time. “He really supported public affairs,” said a media officer from the tour. “In fact, he insisted on inviting local Afghan media whenever we had a news conference on base. When visiting a forward operating location or provincial reconstruction team he always had a PIO with him and local Afghan media were always invited. It was a high-tempo tour with lots of trips outside the wire.”

That said, the Chief Public Information Officer (CPIO) billet went unfilled for the first three months of the Dutch command of RC(South). The Deputy was initially a British officer with two weeks of media awareness training, replaced at the end of his three-month tour with another British officer, described as highly capable and with a Special Forces background that was helpful when explaining complex multi-national joint operations to media.

Canada and the Netherlands provided a public affairs captain each, with the Dutch providing an unqualified imagery technician. “He was someone with a ‘good eye’ for photography and wanted to deploy. He arrived without camera equipment, for the first three months using what the Public Affairs Officer brought from Canada,” recalled an officer who served during this period.

“He spent his first two weeks with other image techs to learn more about the trade including how to write captions. With his positive attitude and work ethic, he turned out to be a great asset for us.” The staff was rounded out by a Lieutenant from a Baltic country with limited English capability and who was designated the media analysis officer, working closely with the three Afghan interpreters. They continued as the link to the local Afghan reporters, but were under Public Information rather than Info Ops during this tour.

The Kandahar Air Field was still at this point under U.S. command. A lone American captain Public Affairs Officer reported to the base commander, a National Guard colonel from Alaska. Three NCOs supported national requirements and the independently minded U.S. military paper Stars and Stripes. There was no facility to host embedded media.

Meanwhile, national assets had established effective embedding programs. The Canadian Task Force in Kandahar province had at its peak as many as 20 media at once but regularly 5-10 media at a time, splitting their embedded time at Kandahar Air Field, outside the wire with the Task Force and with the Provincial Reconstruction Team. While their interest was national, with that many media in place for extended periods, competition for stories also meant there was some international focus and interest as well. In April 2007, a reporter for *The Globe and Mail* published an article citing allegations of abuse of detainees transferred by the Canadian military to Afghan authorities. The piece set in train a series of actions and reactions in Canada involving extended investigations, court cases and the deployment of corrections officials to monitor the Canadian-transferred detainees. It was an issue that came to define a not-insignificant proportion of Afghanistan-related reporting in Canadian media for years, enough that one wag noted it had changed the meaning of 3D from defence, development, diplomacy, to 3D (detainees, death, and denial of information).¹⁰³

The British in Helmand Province had a well-established press information centre with a substantial contingent of military and civilian communications personnel running an effective program for a large number of almost exclusively British media. Their focus was squarely on reporting the hard fighting faced by the under-resourced British military effort in Helmand, the poppy capital of the world. And, “mid-way through my six months, we were able to figure out the Australians had two public affairs officers at the Zabol PRT, but they were nationally focused and only embedded Australian media,” recalled the NATO officer.

At first each Task Force developed their own accreditation process and operated quite independently until the ARRC was settled enough to issue clear guidance

and a NATO media accreditation process was developed. This provided greater situational awareness including which media were operating in theatre and how their efforts at reporting might be best supported.

At the tail end of the first summer of fighting in the south under NATO command, the media office was just beginning to finally emerge from summer 'survival mode' with some breathing space to get established. Staff were working in an active operational theatre with Info Ops, PSYOPS, CIMIC and Special Forces – a situation experienced for the first time by all staff, not just the information-related communities. Posting information about the work, activities and challenges faced by RC (South) to the NATO or ISAF website remained a challenge throughout the tour. By early 2007, PSYOPS was given a boost by the introduction of RANA radio, a Pashto language station broadcasting from Kingston, Ontario, (Canada) to Kandahar and Kabul, and staffed by Afghan-Canadians.

In addition to supporting province-wide operations, plans and dealing with critical incidents, the rapid growth of indigenous media meant extra effort to better understand this dynamic, including learning which media were at work in the area, and how best to communicate with them. A media centre had been established in Kandahar province and most local Afghan media went there where they had access to internet and phones. "If we wanted to connect to them," recalled the media officer, "we would call one reporter and somehow managed to speak to at least 10 of them through the one phone. They were trying hard and we enjoyed working with them." Some were also still working as 'fixers' for international media agencies and would bring pamphlets and flyers being distributed by Info Ops and Special Forces, "without us being aware or sure who was even distributing the material."

An effective working relationship with local Afghan media had been established and was mutually beneficial, "enough that they trusted us and provided a lot of useful information," said the NATO media officer. "One time a vehicle in a NATO convoy travelling near Kandahar City had engine trouble and pulled over. The soldiers tried to set up a security perimeter but panicked and started shooting at vehicles that refused to pull over or slow down. A local Afghan journalist passing by had his vehicle shot up. He called one of the interpreters and relayed the scene: I could hear the gunfire. I told him to get out and run for cover, then ran to inform Ops that a convoy of ours was in trouble. In their haste, the convoy had not yet called for support.

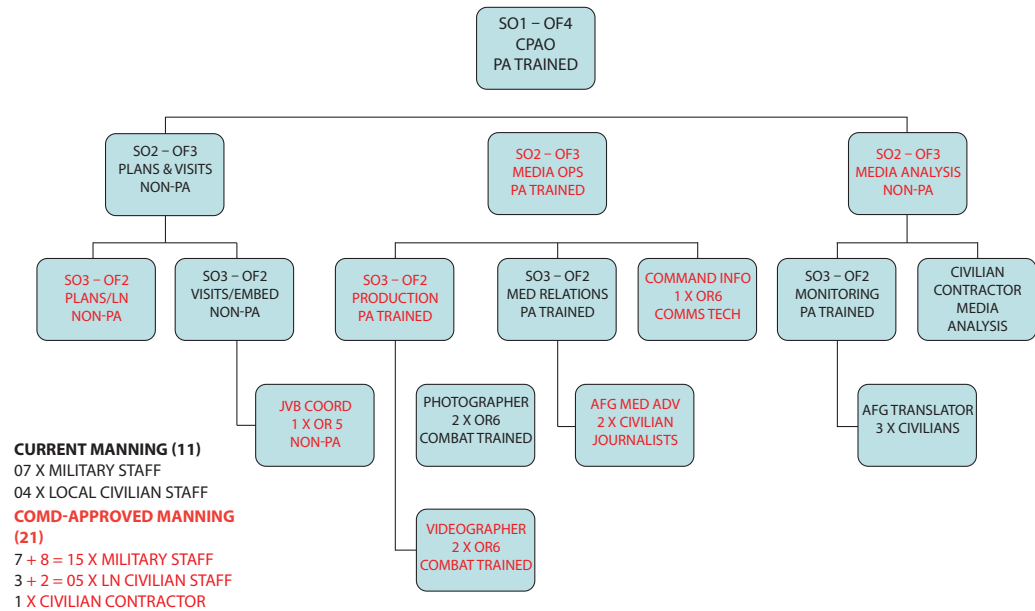
A quick response force was launched but sadly we learned later that day that two Afghans were killed and at least three Afghans were injured. The next day, I asked to meet the reporter to see the damage for myself. It was extensive. This was the reality for Afghans living in Kandahar City..."

Another Spring Offensive and Still Little Respite: January - November 2008

Staffing of the RC (South) public affairs office heading into the third successive insurgent-touted ‘spring offensive’ continued to be modest. The lieutenant-colonel chief was trained in public affairs, the deputy not; the captain overseeing plans/visits/embedded media had no directly relevant training. There was still limited video capability and virtually no reliable means to obtain it from nations to pass on to ISAF HQ.

Over the course of the tour, an additional 10 staff to the existing 11 positions were identified and agreed by the command as a critical manning priority, requested by RC (South) and ISAF in order to enhance media operations planning capability, video support, media relations, command/internal information, and visitor’s bureau liaison. Neither Canada, nor the Netherlands, nor the UK were able to provide any additional staff nor were funds made available to hire better media monitoring capability, a key element to track and respond to the insurgent propaganda and information campaign. Figure 6 provides an overview of the capabilities identified as an urgent fill.

Figure 6:
RC (South) Public Information Office Manning Shortfalls, 2008



The UK and the Netherlands tended to replace their staff every three months, the former providing quality military officers though with little to no communications-related experience; the latter was short on senior officers with related experience.

The Canadian staff, who were deployed for six months, each received three weeks of leave plus travel time out of the country, the effect being the equivalent of one trained staff member being away for almost half the tour. The cumulative effect was a constant round of training, mentoring and substantial oversight as staff learned on the job rather than immediately being able to operate at full capacity. Absent critical mass, training shortcomings exacerbated the challenges of dealing with the increasing number of issues as the security situation deteriorated.

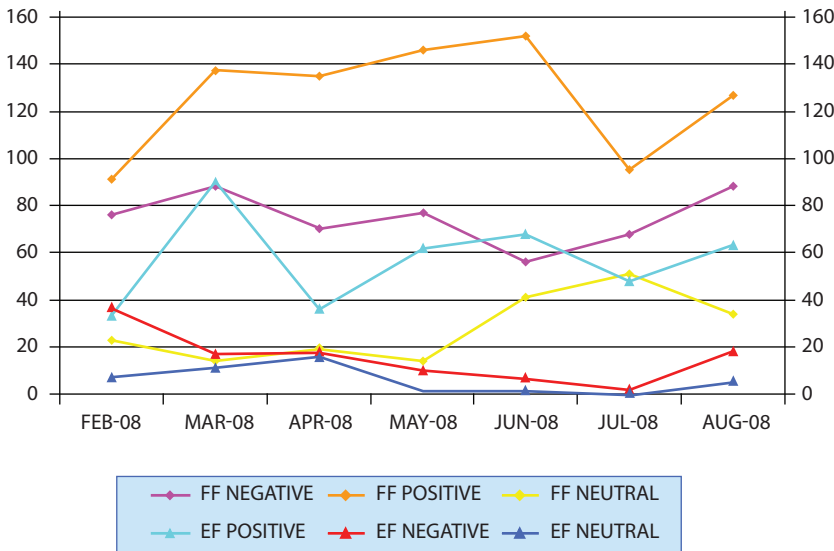
PSYOPS activities took place at Task Force and ISAF HQ levels while RC(South) focused on coordinating the effort. Info Ops, though meant to be a coordinating or enabling function was “an unknown quantity for most staff at the regional command level,” one experienced practitioner explained. “This was because most of the Public Affairs, PSYOPS and Info Ops personnel were more inexperienced and junior to their colleagues at the national Task Forces, which was not always helpful to build credibility.”

The communication effort is driven in no small measure by the engagement of the commander, particularly the willingness to engage with embedded media or local, regional, national and international media. Often, a subject matter expert can provide useful detail and explanations about a particular topic or activity but for issues of gravitas or to provide context, perspective, way ahead or ‘vision’, there is rarely a substitute for a commander. The real dread of communication practitioners is having to find ‘work arounds’ when a commander for whatever reason does not make him/herself readily or regularly available to engage media formally or informally. Such was the case for a significant period of time at RC(South) resulting in staff declining or cancelling media requests from embedded journalists. “We could not convince the commander to participate in joint press conferences with Afghan army and police commanders to deliver NATO messages,” recalled a public affairs officer.

The many national approaches continued to hamper the effort for the regional command to be ‘first with news’. The lead for information release authority on major incidents including in the event of ISAF casualties was now held at ISAF HQ which presented real constraints to being able to orchestrate the release of information between Task Forces, RC(South) and ISAF HQ who in turn were coordinating with NATO HQ. The mechanics of obtaining enough quality information to be accurate about what happened, and at the minimum to be able to ‘alert up’, meant the timely public release of information was a challenge made even more difficult in the event more than one nation had taken part in the operation or if forces from Operation Enduring Freedom were involved.

And the Taliban information effort had by now picked up steam and effectiveness, buttressed in no small measure by the lack of ability by ISAF forces to hold the ground just taken. Notwithstanding, the actual volume of print material about activities in the region and the generally favourable or at least balanced coverage tends to be not quite as one-sided as critics tend to remember, as the following RC(S) media analysis of local, national and international media operating in the area indicates.

Figure 7: Media Analysis: Friendly Forces (FF) and Enemy Forces (EF) Number of Stories, February-August 2008



The reality is that every contingent is capped at some level, including national command elements and operational troops, and no nation was immune to the force generation and sustainment challenges. Still, the shortage of trained practitioner capability over the course of several consecutive years particularly in the south continued to limit ISAF HQ efforts at turning the information campaign around. As the Chief PIO in RC(South) during this time succinctly put it, “I did not have sufficient trained military or civilian staff to deliver accurate products on time, to efficiently contribute to the Info Ops campaign against the Taliban, to properly coach and mentor the Afghan National Security Forces Public Affairs teams, to conduct proactive campaigns in Kandahar and Kabul involving the Commander and senior staffs, or to conduct regular visits of Task Force national public affairs teams outside Kandahar Air Field.”

Indeed, the only real surprise is how anyone could continue to be surprised as to why the Alliance was widely considered to be losing the information war at this stage of the campaign.

CHAPTER 4.10

“WE ARE NOT GETTING THE GOOD NEWS STORIES OUT”

A long-standing complaint throughout the campaign from NATO HQ (reinforced regularly by Ambassadors in the North Atlantic Council), generals (reinforced regularly by the Chiefs of Defence Staff in the Military Committee) and government officials (reinforced regularly to forces in theatre through national channels) was that the information effort was not doing enough to “get the good news stories out”. The graphic nature and routine reports of fighting as of summer 2006 was the catalyst for harangues to in-theatre communications practitioners to put more emphasis on positive developments and trends, as if there were many to be had at the time.

Media, went the thinking, were genetically predisposed to report just on ‘things that went bang’, and to be the ones to find a cloud in any silver lining. Further, if media were not inclined to produce feel-good stories, it was because they weren’t looking for them, military forces and officials at the PRTs were not doing enough to find stories to pitch to them, or ISAF forces were not doing enough to get out and collect, then distribute material on their own.

“The constant pressure to produce media wins was misplaced,” said a departmental communications official who served for more than a year in Kandahar. “We spent countless hours/days/weeks courting positive coverage from organisations for whom an agenda is pre-determined based on a proven business model. The naiveté that somehow the truth and facts as we presented them was enough to merit front-page headlines was, at times, hard to digest.”¹⁰⁴

The most likely source of what good news did exist on the development and reconstruction fronts was to be found in the work of the PRTs. By the deployment of ISAF IX though, PRTs were still very much embryonic – national efforts focused in limited geographic areas, and information about their activities was more often closely guarded than readily shared. The lack of baseline progress indicators made identifying success difficult, and not until much later in the campaign was there a ready means to collate, assess and package information and data for public consumption across the breadth of effort. The work by Public Affairs and PSYOPS to promote successes was also constrained by the security situation on the ground that very much limited freedom of movement.

Drawing attention to particular activities such as a school or well opening also signalled it out to be overtly targeted and attacked by Taliban forces. Afghan institutions were weak. All organisations trying to do work or attempting to coordinate the effort, especially the UN, were struggling to deploy staff to contested areas. The Regional Commands were also initially not entirely sure how to best align nationally focused PRT activity with security and were not optimally organised to do so. It was a classic recipe for an ‘over-promise and under-deliver’ scenario.

Blatantly peddling small-scale successes in theatre hurt, not helped NATO credibility. In the face of Afghan civilian casualties, NATO casualties and so many downward trend lines of critical variables like corruption, the counter-narcotics effort, indigenous force training or the lack of Afghan government capacity, looking to deliberately draw focus to stories like ‘troops give pencils and books to children and ‘troops supply 20 motorcycles to security forces’ was of very little interest to media, particularly to editors back home spending large sums still to embed media with military forces and looking for ‘newsy news.’ It also did not help credibility when school teachers could not be found for the schools built or when the security situation led parents to keep their children at home. As it turned out, there was insufficient gas for the donated motorcycles, the Afghans were not trained to maintain them, and they were kept in a compound ‘in the event of emergency’ in order to guard against wear and tear.¹⁰⁵ Good news efforts thereby became the grounds for stories of how disconnected was the reconstruction and development effort from real community needs.

Many agencies, including the UN, fearing their own activities no matter how beneficial or neutral would render them a target, also took great pains to distance themselves from being too closely associated with the NATO military operation. Agencies were also wary of military forces’ motives. Even activities as obviously beneficial as the polio eradication campaign were suspect when connected with NATO. “The belief from campaign organisers was that NATO was using this as a means for their forces to collect intelligence in communities, so they wanted nothing to do with them,” recalled one development official familiar with the program.

Nations also deployed to theatre with photographic and audio-visual assets, but rarely shared their material with NATO, which did not have an effective means to store and broadly distribute material in any event. As Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer said in late 2007, “When it comes to video, we are frankly in the stone age. NATO has no ability to gather video from the field, to show people what is happening.

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105 Ibid.

We are also barely on the field when it comes to the web ... [We have] one arm tied behind our back. And the other arm is pretty weak too.”¹⁰⁶ This is, it should be recalled, four years after NATO assumed the ISAF lead.

Improvements to schools, hospitals, community centres, or military support to a myriad of worthwhile initiatives could occur without significant public notice of ISAF efforts as a result. ‘Security’ was the military’s lane, with responsibility for the effort to directly profile reconstruction and development activities generally left to international organisations and agencies, or to national civilian departments.

The reality though, was that many organisations were scrambling to establish operations and ‘survive’ in light of the security situation, or were mightily understaffed. One-third of the international positions at UNAMA were still vacant by 2008 for example, a situation caused mainly by the bureaucratic process of up to a year to recruit and field staff.¹⁰⁷ The effort to communicate successes being achieved started to take root and form through General Richard’s Policy Action Group (PAG) initiative in 2006, including from the Strategic Communications sub-group, though the PAG did not survive beyond his tour. Absent a mechanism to coordinate communication efforts more broadly with the Afghan National Security Forces, the President’s office, the UN spokesperson and other stakeholders, there was little chance the overall effort would appear to be harmonised let alone ‘comprehensive’.

It is not entirely clear how many civilian communicators deployed to PRTs throughout the campaign though the circumstantial evidence suggests “not many.”¹⁰⁸ When they did deploy they faced considerably more work-related challenges than their military colleagues. While there were exceptions, employees from national development departments or agencies had limited expeditionary experience working with military forces in the midst of an active counter-insurgency campaign. “I landed without a computer, email account, supplies or support,” recalls one such civilian attached to a PRT in RC (South) in 2007. “In Kandahar, I was communicating a civilian story in a military environment. Embedded media go to a place like that looking for stories of combat, not development, so suggesting stories to them was more difficult.

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106 Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, "Public Diplomacy in NATO-led Operations", 8 Oct 2007.

107 Eide (2012), p. 38.

108 This is based on interviews with three civilian communication officials who collectively spent more than two years in RC(S); a media scan trying to find attributable civilian spokespersons, to some but little avail; and an examination of the *ISAF Mirror*, the 'internal' magazine publication that was for the most part a compendium of stories about reconstruction and development, almost all of which appear to be written by military staff.

The military facilitates coverage of their own because they have the resources including vehicles, and accommodation to take reporters along with them. They also have people who are willing to talk to them. On the civilian side, I had to convince media there was a good story, get them to check it out and then try arranging for them to be able to do that, but being completely dependent on the availability and willingness of the military to take them.”

Still, though it was a formidable challenge, many good news stories *were* being reported and aired, just not in the major papers and media outlets being read by decision makers every day, nor with top-of-fold headlines or leading newscasts trumpeting success. Instead, the incremental wins could be found in the thousands of ‘home-town’ stories facilitated by public affairs staff or composed by hundreds of media who embedded with or visited various national forces over more than a decade of operations.

“Something as simple as calling a small-town radio station and putting them on the phone with a CIMIC operator in Spin Boldak was golden, and helped paint a much more realistic story of our efforts as told through the experiences of those who lived it,” said a Kandahar-based communications official. “It worked because it was real, unobstructed, unadulterated, and sincere. The stuff sells itself. People want to see themselves in a story – the guy you knew from high school now building schools in Afghanistan is interesting. Some nation paying for schools to be built in Afghanistan ... less interesting.”

This outreach was supplemented and facilitated by tens of thousands of personnel of every rank and from many nations, who while they were on tour or following their return from theatre spoke about their experiences. These stories were shared with classrooms from towns that donated school supplies; at Legions, functions, memorial events, sporting events, and a multitude of other forums where people heard about small-scale stories of success. It wasn’t enough to turn the tide of the war any earlier, but the national public outreach efforts including the media embedding program with its home-town focus was a major force that solidified the base of domestic support Alliance-wide and sustained the overall campaign.

CHAPTER 4.11

ISAF X/XI FEBRUARY 2007 - JUNE 2008 GENERAL DAN MCNEILL, U.S.

“Let’s consider the headlines of 12 months ago this day last year. The headlines swung back and forth between two significant themes. The resurgent Taliban coming back – they were going to sweep across the battlefield and that has not occurred. In fact, I’d say the insurgent has not accomplished a great deal of his objectives this year on the battlefield, but he did accomplish one thing– he has remained in your writings and broadcasts, he certainly remained the darling of the press. I don’t understand that, but he has.”

General McNeill, during media briefing, January 2008¹⁰⁹

“I could do this, Sherard, if I had 500,000 men.”

General McNeill to the UK Ambassador to Afghanistan¹¹⁰

27 February 2007: Bagram Air Base is attacked during visit by U.S. Vice-President Cheney.

4 March 2007: U.S. Marine unit responds after a suicide bomber attack on their convoy in Shinwar. Several Afghans are killed, and the unit is withdrawn from theatre pending (lengthy) investigations.

12 May 2007: Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah is killed.

7 December 2007: Battle of Musa Qala. British forces re-take the town without shelling it, in the first ISAF operation substantively informed by a targeted influence campaign.

12 December 2007: Prime Minister Blair says in House of Commons that “I make it clear that we will not enter into any negotiations with these people [Taliban].”

14 January 2008: Serena Hotel is attacked in Kabul.

17 February 2008: Suicide bombing in Kandahar kills an estimated 100 people.

10 June 2008: Airstrike in Gora Prai, Pakistan, kills 11 Pakistani paramilitary forces.

13 June 2008: Taliban attack Sarposha prison, freeing as many as 1,200 prisoners.

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109 <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/speech/2008/sp080102a.html> 2 Jan 08

110 Cowper-Coles (2011), p. 148.

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Civilian casualties	Staffing in ISAF HQ	Civilian casualties
Poppy harvest and role of NATO in eradication efforts	Staffing in Regional Commands	Hard fighting in Helmand and Kandahar provinces
Security of forces, and NATO casualties	Efforts to introduce StratCom principles	Poppy harvest
		South Korean missionaries are kidnapped by Taliban, 2 killed

Context. In General McNeill, NATO was getting the first COMISAF who came to the job with real experience in theatre, having been Commander of Joint Task Force 180 in 2002-03, with its focus on counterterrorism operations and assisting the rebuilding of the Afghan National Army. His 16-month ISAF tour marks him as the second-longest serving COMISAF, one month less than General Allen. The difference in style and approaches to one's public profile between the previous and new COMISAF was stark. The combination of his previous tour, his Special Forces background and having been appointed by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld meant that when he took command he had a reputation and a nickname – “Bomber” McNeill – which media were quick to highlight during his first week in command.¹¹¹ This was not a theme they came to by themselves but one being encouraged by officials particularly from Washington who were not sad to see the end of General Richards and that command's orientation on reconstruction and capacity building.

From day one McNeill was labelled a “war fighter to the bone” by one U.S. military official who said “his arrival likely signals the end of such deals [which led to the Taliban taking over Musa Qala in the last days of Richards' command], and a senior Afghan military official said their Defence Ministry expected a policy of “strong military action” under him.¹¹² Commentator Ahmed Rashid observed the same, writing that “the danger at this point is that an overly aggressive NATO force in Afghanistan could alienate Afghans, and thus cause the Taliban's support base to grow.¹¹³

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111 See Carlotta Gall, "American Takes Over Command of NATO Forces as Its Mission Grows in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2007, and Economist (http://www.economist.com/node/8691739/print?story_id=8691739).

112 Jason Straziuso, "U.S. General Takes Command of NATO Force in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 5, 2007.

113 "Taliban Takeover of Town Could Mark Start of Military Offensive," February 4, 2007. Eurasianet.org

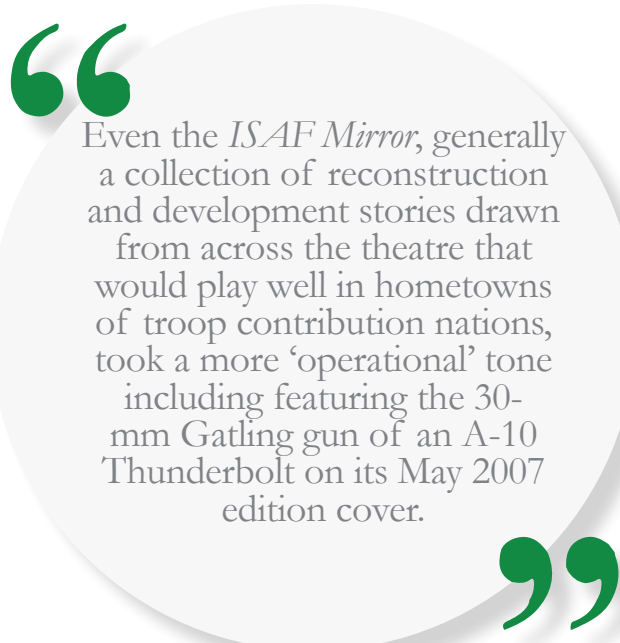
It was an example of a media shaping operation that was successful in terms of ‘getting a particular message out’, but immediately after the change of command the view had solidified – the NATO mission would increasingly look like the U.S. counterterrorism mission.

The Information Effort.

General McNeill’s focus quickly turned away from a media-focused enterprise to an Info Ops-centred campaign. Under his command, Info Ops and

PSYOPS were once again put directly under J3 authority with military Public Affairs reporting to the commander. At the same time, in an effort to effect greater synergy, more emphasis was put on trying to establish processes based on StratCom principles, though allowing each of the capabilities their own functional authority chains thus a “desire” for greater coordination, but without a specific mechanism to effect it. To some, this led to a view that Info Ops was *de facto*, the information coordinator including for Public Affairs.¹¹⁴ This is the first and only time in the campaign the view is expressed that Info Ops had greater weight of profile in the ISAF HQ than Public Affairs. Colonel (Ret’d) Richard Welter, the CJPOTF Commander at the time, recalls this period as an active one with a real emphasis on extending the PSYOPS radio network, a greater effort at connecting the PSYOPS organisation with the ISAF HQ, and for the first time, planning the first serious NATO-sponsored surveys.

The record of ISAF during this time is more balanced than the commander’s reputation would suggest. McNeill frequently referred to the requirement for better governance and the impact of narcotics on the insurgency and the need to stamp that out to have any hope of winning.¹¹⁵



Even the *ISAF Mirror*, generally a collection of reconstruction and development stories drawn from across the theatre that would play well in hometowns of troop contribution nations, took a more ‘operational’ tone including featuring the 30-mm Gatling gun of an A-10 Thunderbolt on its May 2007 edition cover.

114 Anaïs Reding, Kristin Weed, and Jeremy J, Ghez, *NATO's Strategic Communications concept and its relevance for France*, RAND Europe, 2010, p. 19.

115 "In fact, I think it's as simple as in portions of those five provinces the insurgency is illegal narcotics. Illegal narcotics is the insurgency," he told a Pentagon press briefing. See <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/speech/2008/sp080530a.html>

The counter-narcotics effort was to this point an utter failure and deliberations about what role NATO might take was a divisive subject at NATO. Thomas Schweich, an American with Ambassador status who was leading the U.S. effort in this area in Afghanistan and a big supporter of aerial eradication, in 2008 wrote that the problem was “an odd cabal of timorous Europeans, myopic media outlets, corrupt Afghans, blinkered Pentagon officers, politically motivated Democrats and the Taliban [who] were preventing the implementation of an effective counterdrug program. And the rest of us could not turn them around.”¹¹⁶

Still, the public expression of the campaign during this period often took a tone of decidedly offensive action. “Most people using the term ‘comprehensive approach’ don’t know what they are talking about,” McNeill said in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, a German media outlet that was famous for looking to point out the ‘error’ of the American approach to the Afghan campaign. “The comprehensive approach includes a strong military option – first fight the insurgency and then help reconstruct the country. The U.S. forces have shown what that looks like. They attack militants in a valley and then build a road. Those who talk about comprehensive approach should not forget the combat element.”¹¹⁷

“The obvious rise in numbers of clashes with insurgents is not an expression of heightened tension or insecurity per se,” said German Major-General Bruno Kasdorf, the ISAF HQ Chief of Staff. “It rather shows the more active stance of ISAF towards the insurgency in 2007. This led to indisputable operational successes. There was not a single direct confrontation with insurgents who were not beaten heavily. Most importantly, ISAF, alongside with coalition forces of Operation Enduring Freedom, were quite successful in eliminating mid- to high-level leadership of the insurgency.”¹¹⁸

References to taking the fight to the enemy were common. “Do you recall the end of 2006 or beginning of 2007? They made the same prediction. But the real offensive was the offensive by the alliance and our Afghan brothers.

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116 Thomas Schweich, “Is Afghanistan a Narco-State? *The New York Times Magazine*, July 27, 2008. He also recounts how NATO militaries were involved in the information campaign: “Although Britain’s foreign office strongly backed antinarcotics efforts (with the exception of aerial eradication), the British military were even more hostile to the antidrug mission than the U.S. military. British forces — centred in Helmand — actually issued leaflets and bought radio advertisements telling the local criminals that the British military was not part of the anti-poppy effort. I had to fly to Brussels and show one of these leaflets to the supreme allied commander in Europe, who oversees Afghan operations for NATO, to have this counterproductive information campaign stopped.”

117 See <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-top-isaf-commander-mcneill-more-than-promises->

118 See <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/speech/2007/sp071011a.html>

The offensive this year will be ours again,” said McNeill.¹¹⁹ Even the *ISAF Mirror*, generally a collection of reconstruction and development stories drawn from across the theatre that would play well in hometowns of troop contribution nations, took a more ‘operational’ tone including featuring the 30-mm Gatling gun of an A-10 Thunderbolt on its May 2007 edition cover. A story inside of one day’s (May 13) worth of airpower, and how effects were characterised is insightful:

*“An Air Force B-1B Lancer dropped multiple guided bomb unit-31s on insurgent compounds near Kajaki Sofia. The B-1 also performed a show of presence on friendly forces routes in the area. U.S. Navy F/A-18 Hornets dropped GBU-12s and fired 20mm cannon rounds at enemy vehicles and a sniper near Tarin Kowt. The hits were confirmed successful. Near Now Zad, Navy F/A-18 Super Hornets dropped GBU-12s on enemies in the area including a sniper. The JTAC confirmed the bombs hit their targets ... French Mirage 2000 fighters dropped GBU-12s and multiple flares supporting coalition forces confronting enemy targets near Orgun-E. Also in Orgun-E, Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt IIs strafed enemy positions with 30mm rounds, helping coalition forces taking fire in the area. Other A-10s provided a show of force supporting a convoy receiving mortar and small arms fire near Ali Kheyl. The show of force was reported successful and the enemy dissipated. In total, 47 close-air-support missions were flown in support of ISAF and Afghan security forces, reconstruction activities and route patrols. Additionally, 15 aircraft provided reconnaissance in the theatre on this day.”*¹²⁰

This period marks the start of an increasingly exasperated and vocal Afghan President following a spate of high-profile incidents at the start of summer 2007: “Civilian deaths and arbitrary decisions to search people’s houses have reached an unacceptable level and Afghans cannot put up with it any longer,” said Karzai.¹²¹ By July, major air strikes causing significant Afghan loss of life were occurring with alarming regularity with the conduct of the campaign by NATO and U.S.-led troops now quite indistinguishable from each other in the eyes of Afghans and troop contributing nations. President Karzai continued to protest loudly after each incident. “Innocent people are becoming victims of reckless operations,” said Karzai. “You don’t fight a terrorist by firing a field gun [24 miles] away into a target.

119 See <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-top-isaf-commander-mcneill-more-than-promises>

120 "May 13, a day of ISAF airpower" *ISAF Mirror*, June 2007, p. 4

121 See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/6615781.stm

That's definitely, surely bound to cause civilian casualties."¹²² In many cases the U.S.-led forces claimed huge Taliban losses, even as many as 136 fighters, but inevitably the line was "no reports of civilian casualties." This was a frequent and egregious claim to try and get ahead of the Taliban propaganda campaign but was regularly found out to be wrong, to the great detriment of the U.S., and NATO missions. There were always promises to do better, but the bifurcated chain of command meant the problem continued.

Under those circumstances, ISAF Public Affairs was in no position to stem the tide of backlash and criticism. Media briefs continued to be held weekly or every other week and McNeill was amenable to doing interviews. By now though, the Iraq War had virtually exhausted the supply of available American Public Affairs staff and NATO nations were not looking to fill the empty Crisis Establishment positions; whether this was an expression of the keen discomfort some nations were feeling toward the mission's 'optics' is mere speculation. But, the reality, according to the Chief Public Affairs Officer for the tour, was that "the Public Affairs office was never more than 40 per cent of its strength on paper, let alone what it probably should have been. Staffing was a major deficiency throughout the entire tour. And, not all nations found it easy to be working for a woman."¹²³

In short, the ISAF communications effort in 2007-08 was defensive in nature, in military terms a fighting withdrawal – the most difficult of operations – and in large measure responsive to events, a consequence not of practitioner ability but of severely limited resources, an operational mindset geared toward kinetic operations above all else, and an inability of decisionmakers to settle on strategies for "the big issues" at the heart of the campaign's problems, including Pakistan, counter-corruption and counter-narcotics.

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122 See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/6234046.stm

123 Interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Claudia Foss.

CHAPTER 4.12

CREATION OF AN AFGHAN GOVERNMENT MEDIA AND INFORMATION CENTRE (GMIC)

It was evident early in the NATO-led mission that Afghan institutions did not just need to be repaired but were shattered and needed to be built from the ground up. The notion that NATO could facilitate capacity building in functional areas beyond the narrow remits of the Afghan National Army or Afghan National Police was resisted by many and was anathema to others. “Look, it was the International *Security Assistance* Force, not the NATO Nation-Building Free-for-all,” said a senior officer when asked about this subject.¹²⁴ This was a view supported in large measure amongst international agencies and NGOs, some of whose fundraising efforts and very existence depended on a clear separation of responsibilities.

In post-conflict societies, the actions required to facilitate the establishment of functioning institutions does not divide neatly into stovepipes of defence, development and diplomacy. Security is a condition for development to be able to take root, and development is a condition for security. Whilst NATO commanders understood that all along, excepting the work of the PRTs there were real constraints to viewing security in a broader context than merely prosecuting operations.

For some though, capacity building leading to good governance was the means to provide human security – and also the exit strategy. During the course of Lieutenant-General Hillier’s tour as COMISAF from February -August 2004, a small number of officers from ISAF began providing strategic planning capability to a few select non-security ministries like the Ministry of Finance as part of an effort to help harmonise and coordinate the international community’s and ISAF’s support to the Afghan Transitional Authority.¹²⁵ Within six months of his tour ending, Hillier was Canada’s Chief of the Defence Staff and in this capacity President Karzai personally requested his assistance to continue to help build capacity in Afghan ministries.

In August 2005, a Strategic Advisory Team-Afghanistan (SAT-A) of a little more than a dozen senior Canadian military officers, one civilian from defence and one official from the Canadian International Development Agency were established in a series of unprotected houses in downtown Kabul.

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124 Personal exchange, 2015.

125 Lieutenant-Colonel Michel-Henri St-Louis, “The Strategic Advisory Team in Afghanistan – Part of the Canadian Comprehensive Approach to Stability Operations”, *Canadian Military Journal*, (2009), Vol. 9, Number 3.

The team wore civilian clothes, drove themselves to and from work, and operated ‘outside the wire’ to the considerable envy of many other nations, applying “generalist military planning skills to the solution of civilian problems.”¹²⁶

“A low profile was key. Facilitating, mentoring, assisting and coaching from the background was the preferred approach,” said Brigadier-General Serge Labbé, the last of three commanders of the innovative experiment that lasted for three, one-year rotations. “Our centre of gravity was credibility, supported by three tenets: we are in support, we are guests of the Afghans, and our agenda is the Afghan agenda. It was all about them, never about us – we facilitated, we didn’t dictate – sustainable Afghan solutions to Afghan problems and making sure Afghans took credit for all successes.”¹²⁷ The SAT-A worked with more than a dozen non-security ministries across the breadth of government including Finance, Education, Information and Culture, Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and the Office of the President’s Spokesman.

Remarkably, by mid-2007 President Karzai and his Cabinet still did not have an effective way or means through modern technology (referring mainly to TV, radio, and on-line) to communicate widely and in a timely fashion with the Afghan population, including the ability to speedily counter Taliban propaganda, nor to organise and manage its own Government-wide communications effort. There was no central Afghan-run facility where officials could gather to promulgate or disseminate information to media about programs, issues, developments in country or to respond quickly to crises. Each senior official had access to their own network of journalists and briefed from their ministries or at facilities made available by international agencies or NATO.

Without an accreditation centre it was not even possible to have credible insight into which media were in country or expected to be in country for major events. Coordinated national-level communications by the Afghan government was significantly constrained. Nor was there a central press information facility where journalists could gather to get advice or assistance in moving around the country, to obtain general background information or to set up interviews with Afghan officials, though many seemed to have access to the President’s office. Little wonder then, that there was a lack of Afghan voices out front responding to Afghan problems.

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126 Colonel M.D. Capstick, “*Strengthening the Weak: The Canadian Forces in Afghanistan.*” Canadian Institute of International Affairs, March 2006.

127 Interview with Brigadier-General Serge Labbé.

Three like-minded colleagues from the UK embassy, the U.S. embassy and the Canadian Strategic Advisory Team were determined to try to fix that and the impetus for a Government Media and Information Centre (GMIC) was born.¹²⁸ Requests for financial support were rebuffed by NATO, the UN and various national aid agencies, dismissed as an idea that “will never work.” Personal appeals to their individual ambassadors, each of whom recognised the need and value of such a facility, enabled start-up funding that was channelled through the Asia Foundation for implementation. A modest-sized building was secured and renovated along with the construction of a large press conference centre with capacity for 150 journalists, complete with Internet connectivity and live-streaming capability allowing for news conferences. The centre also included a journalist’s lounge/reception area, boardroom and offices to support the coordination of the government’s communications efforts. A sod-turning ceremony was held in November 2007, the facility operating by mid-2008.

An intensive training program for all 26 Afghan communication directors to run the centre was developed and delivered at the Strategic Advisory Team’s facilities in downtown Kabul. “It was capacity building in the best interests of Afghans, not to effect any foreign national objective whatsoever,” said Lieutenant-Commander John Williston, the SAT-A’s public affairs officer. “We helped establish the venue and provided training, coaching and mentoring for some months but it was staffed entirely by Afghans. Understandably, we also had to put considerable effort into convincing and demonstrating to them this was their centre; ISAF, NATO and others immediately saw the value of it and tried to make it their own but we were at pains to keep them at bay, a critical requirement if the centre was to have any credibility as being about and for Afghans.”¹²⁹

The physical space was a venue to provide regular coaching, mentoring and training including for young Afghan officials including instruction on how to produce communication strategies, analysis, event proposals, public speaking and reports, as well as media spokesperson training for officials up to and including deputy ministers. In turn, they became more effective at communicating government policy, programs and activities to national, regional and international audiences. The GMIC reported to the Office of the President and was invested with authority to task ministries and provincial governor’s offices, mechanisms that had been absent to that point.

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 128 These were Alan Percival, a strategic communication advisor from the UK embassy, Thomas Niblock from the U.S. embassy, and Lieutenant-Commander John Williston who was the senior strategic communication advisor on the Canadian SAT. [Interview with Lieutenant-Commander Williston]. The initiative also received strong support from the President’s Spokesperson Humayun Hamidzada.

129 Ibid.

The facility provided accreditation services to visiting journalists, a venue to host press conferences for all organisations and agencies, and to conduct media monitoring and analysis.

Most importantly, said Williston, “it served as a strategic and influence platform” for the President and his Cabinet to help establish strategy, policy, and to effect greater coordination of the Afghan government’s voice and message. Interestingly, it also served as neutral territory where competing ministers could negotiate their projects.”¹³⁰ The GMIC served as the model for the creation of satellite offices in several provinces thereafter.

The facility grew and thrived, at its peak employing more than 40 Afghans in communications. It continues to be a key asset in the Afghan government’s ability to communicate more proactively with its citizens. It is not a coincidence that the interest and availability of a lead Afghan voice becomes more prominent around this time ... though not always to the liking of the international community intent on promoting their own national interests or version of events.

Building indigenous capacity and effective capability through a vehicle such as the GMIC is an example of communications effort at its most strategic. It was this capacity-building component that was to make it a viable and valuable Afghan-owned, led, and sustainable asset. The regular criticism that Afghans were not taking lead responsibility for communicating to their people was fair enough. Still, the initiative to substantively change that approach did not happen until half-way through the ISAF campaign, with the impetus for it coming from outside the ISAF and NATO chains of command.

CHAPTER 4.13

JUNE 2008 - JUNE 2009

GENERAL DAVID MCKIERNAN, U.S.

“The basic problem in Afghanistan is not too much Taliban; it’s too little good governance.”
Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer¹³¹

“A principal strategic tactic of the Taliban, is the use – is either provoking or exploiting civilian casualties. And we have done a lot – and I must say, General McKiernan has done a lot – in recent months to try and reduce the level of civilian casualties. The fact of the matter is, civilian casualties since January in Afghanistan are down 40 percent over a year ago during the same period. And U.S., Afghan and ISAF casualties are up 75 percent during the same period. But figuring out how to come out better on the strategic communications side of this is an ongoing challenge for us.”

U.S. Defence Secretary Gates¹³²

6 July 2008: Airstrike in Nangarhar hits wedding party, killing 47.

22 August 2008: Airstrike in Shindand province kills Taliban but also scores of civilians. After numerous denials of civilian casualties a subsequent U.S. review shows the initial investigation to be in error.

September 2008: Almost 3,000 British troops in a 100-vehicle security and logistics convoy transport a hydroelectric power turbine through Taliban territory to the Kajaki dam.

3 November 2008: Airstrike hits wedding party killing more than 60 insurgents and civilians. President Karzai issues “my first demand of the new president of the United States – to put an end to civilian casualties.”

17 February 2009: President Obama announces troop surge of 17,000. The forces had been requested by COMISAF for months, the decision having been delayed by the U.S. election.

27 March 2009: President Obama announces a “comprehensive new strategy “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future,” a shift of emphasis of the mission to increasing the size of the Afghan security forces, and a civilian surge.¹³³

4 May 2009: Airstrike in Granai by three F-18s and a B-1 bomber kill as many as 140.

11 May 2009: General McKiernan is relieved of command.

131 “Afghanistan: We Can Do Better,” *The Washington Post*, January 18, 2009.

132 May 11, 2009 (during the media briefing announcing that General McKiernan was been relieved of command). See <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4424>

133 See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2009/03/27/a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Afghan civilian casualties	Coordinating lines with Op Enduring Freedom	Afghan civilian casualties and ISAF casualties
ISAF casualties	Lack of comprehensive approach (UNAMA, IOs, NGOs)	The insurgency is deepening
Defining progress	Support to Presidential elections	The new U.S. strategy
Support to election registration		Afghan Presidential elections
Promoting Afghan National Army		Ambush of French soldiers kills 10, wounds 21
		Change of COMISAF

Context. The interconnected nature of the various governance, security, economic and development challenges in Afghanistan were all in evidence during this period. By September, McKiernan had issued a directive aimed at limiting civilian casualties and was putting more emphasis than his predecessor on engaging Afghans and encouraging a comprehensive approach. For instance, there had not been a tripartite commission meeting (of ISAF, Pakistan and Afghan military leaders) for seven months prior to his arrival – and in his first five months McKiernan hosted three such meetings.¹³⁴

He also came to the command with an early sense that the communications effort was wanting. “One of the things when I first arrived that I didn’t think we were doing very well was strategic communications, the idea of being able to get our themes and messages and perspectives out to a variety of audiences, whether they were the people of Afghanistan, whether they were the government of Afghanistan, the region, troop-contributing nations, or Washington, D.C.,” he said. He conceded the campaign was multi-faceted and was being “fought kinetically, and probably more importantly, in terms of ideas and perceptions ... if I showed them [Afghans] PowerPoint slides, I wouldn’t last 30 minutes, 30 seconds, 30 nanoseconds with an Afghan audience. It’s a very oral society. You have to tell stories. You have to communicate your ideas orally to have any credibility at any level...”¹³⁵ McKiernan had put his finger on many of the elements that would evolve the campaign from one that looked a lot like a counterterrorism effort under his predecessor to one that bore the hallmarks of a ‘counterinsurgency light’.

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134 Speech to Atlantic Council, November 19, 2008. See <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/transcripts/transcript-general-david-mckiernan-speaks-at-councils-commanders-series>

135 Ibid.

His was a methodical, deliberate effort with significantly fewer military resources than desired or needed, alongside a tattered and fractured international effort.

Organisation of the Communication Effort. The importance of a population-centred campaign and the need to improve strategic communications were themes he frequently referred to in public remarks. “The Afghan people are the centre of gravity in everything we do. Without their support and approval we cannot succeed. We must be able to effectively communicate to them our intentions and the true results of our actions. The insurgents do not need to worry about the truth and have so far been more successful at spreading their lies. We cannot allow their misinformation to continue to degrade the local populace’s support for us. We will be more aggressive and we will get the true story out so that the Afghan people see what the insurgents are really doing to their country.”¹³⁶ How, then, did it go wrong?

As it turns out, from a communications perspective this command is notable for overt challenges with respect to organisation, a general lack of support for the function within the HQ staff, and general dysfunction amongst the disciplines’ communities. There was a weeks-long gap in the change-over between ISAF Spokespersons. The Chief Public Affairs billet was filled in quick succession by two British submariner captains, and then by another UK Navy Captain, though on the third effort the HQ was at least sent an officer with two years’ spokesperson experience at the UK Ministry of Defence. Oddly, the Spokesperson’s office was physically and ‘psychologically separated’ from Public Affairs to the point where Canada was required to dispatch a senior Public Affairs officer to add bench-strength to the Spokesperson, who at that point was Canadian. The relationship with J2 Intelligence was “especially difficult and not at all attuned to our needs,” recalls a Public Affairs officer from the tour.

The communications effort was rightly deemed insufficient to need for the considerable demands being placed on it, and structure was deemed the main culprit. It will be recalled that under General McNeill, Info Ops and PSYOPS reported to the Operations head with Public Affairs reporting to the Commander, a conventional approach that did not make for a seamless enterprise. After considerable discussion the command decision was made to create a strategic communications group headed by a one-star general, under which would be subsumed Public Affairs, Info Ops and PSYOPS, the view being that this would result in greater synchronisation of effort.¹³⁷

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136 Ibid.

137 Anaïs Reding, Kristin Weed, and Jeremy J, Ghez, *NATO's Strategic Communications concept and its relevance for France*, RAND Europe, 2010, p. 20.

“

The communications effort was rightly deemed insufficient to need for the considerable demands being placed on it, and structure was deemed the main culprit.

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The concept contravened NATO policy in two ways – by taking the direct reporting relationship to the Commander away from Public Affairs, and by integrating the planning and execution of both Info Ops and PSYOPS directly with that of Public Affairs. Two days before the change was to go into effect, Reuters reporter Jon Hemming wrote about the proposed merger, spurred on by several NATO ‘insiders’ concerned about the impact

such an organisational change portended.¹³⁸ The brouhaha also exposed concerns by the same people that the information effort was increasingly becoming a one-dimensional American effort. The article generated discussion with SHAPE and NATO HQ, and ISAF was quickly instructed to follow NATO policy. Four days later the re-organisation was shelved.

Within weeks a one-star U.S. officer was in place to oversee the Info Ops and PSYOPS effort and to coordinate with Public Affairs, the direct reporting relationship to the Commander having been re-instated.¹³⁹

CJPOTF continued to produce a variety of quality products (according to the practitioners involved) with a focus on radio programs and newspapers. Press conferences continued on a regular basis and coordination with Afghan spokespersons notably improved, in part assisted by the efforts to set up an Afghan Government Media Information Centre. Having a Spokesperson who was fluent in French was a plus, particularly in the wake of the ambush that killed several French soldiers, with ISAF being able to explain to the people of France why their effort was so important to the campaign. The ‘morning prayers’ with the Command staff constituted the shortest route to clarifying messaging. In the absence of an operational command, all issues came to ISAF HQ to deal with all the time, putting pressure on a team that was still seriously under-strength.

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138 See Jon Hemming, "Press and Psy Ops to merge at NATO Afghan HQ: sources," <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/11/29/us-afghan-nato-idUSTRE4AS0ZV20081129#94vVDH24Lpz7tofr.97>

139 See Jon Hemming, "NATO scraps press and psy ops merger in Afghanistan," <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2008/12/03/uk-afghan-nato-idUKTRE4B23LX20081203>

In a communications grouping weak in overall capacity and distanced from key operational staff, the counter-propaganda campaign was being lost, at the same time as troop contributing nations were regularly been shown imagery of kinetic attacks gone bad.¹⁴⁰

As the operational situation deteriorated, so too did the collective ability to marshal positive outcomes. “The difficulty,” recalled a senior public affairs officer, “had more to do with the challenge in connecting all the dots, including trying to disconnect the Taliban from the population, the drug trade, the effect of civilian casualties, Pakistan sanctuaries, and the constant rotation of contingents, all of which made the situation so difficult to handle for the international community, not just for ISAF.”

In recognition of the worrisome situation, by May 2009 a “StratCom surge” was poised to be launched, with new satellite transmitters and enhancements to bolster important new communication channels including social networking. There was a plan to add up to 50 American military Public Affairs officers to an existing complement of 80 (with as many as two dozen from other troop contributing nation already in theatre), meant to be in place by end summer.¹⁴¹ The Director of StratCom and Strategic Effects, Brigadier-General Michael Ryan, conceded that efforts in the past regarding communication about civilian casualties had not been well-handled. Referring to the August 2008 incident in Shindand province he said, “We screwed that up like you couldn’t believe. We were saying only three were killed, when it was 90, and we finally admitted that yeah, OK, it was 33. Those were the bad old days, when we were not getting in there and checking stuff out.”¹⁴²

The Granai airstrike in early May 2009 showed that in the final analysis, notwithstanding a directive to limit civilian casualties, major mistakes were still taking place. In the wake of reports of more than 100 casualties President Karzai called for an end to coalition air strikes, the Afghan government settling a few days later on a figure of 140-147 dead. “Well, he just framed the entire thing for the Afghan government, right there,” Ryan is quoted as saying. “While an investigation is going on ... That was problematic. A little upsetting. I think [he] unhinged the Afghan side [of the investigations] because they were stuck with that, even though privately they will tell you, ‘Yeah, 147, you’ve got to be sh–ing me.’”¹⁴³

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140 “The lack of matrix support to Public Affairs was brutal,” recalled a senior officer who was in place to also see the transition to the General McChrystal command. “It got a lot better with a StratCom structure.”

141 See <http://afghanistan.nationalpost.com/coalition-forces-rethink-afghanistan-media-strategy/>

142 Ibid.

143 Ibid.



*Afghan Minister of Defence, General Abdul Rahim Wardak and General David McKiernan, 2009
Photo: NATO/ISAF*

Throughout the tour General McKiernan publicly said, briefed and did a lot of the right things in a quiet, understated manner. As SACEUR General Bantz Craddock was fond of saying, though, “We are not losing; we are not winning fast enough.”¹⁴⁴ By early summer-2009 all the various large and small challenges that had beset the communications effort since the end of the ARRC tour had come home to roost: operational trend lines that were not shifting; the lack of a strategic narrative explaining why the force was there; two years of a succession of poorly-equipped, badly under-resourced communication offices,¹⁴⁵ often manned or even led by senior staff not trained in the function; an effort seriously disconnected from operational planning; and an inability to knit together the disparate disciplines to prosecute the communications campaign. Very little of what was being done right was transmitted from ISAF, nor did the conditions exist to do so effectively. The impetus for change was not coming from within ISAF, or even within the respective military chains of command at Brunssum, SHAPE or the Military Committee. Communications-related policy and doctrine remained virtually unchanged. Remarkably, “we need more good news stories,” remained the plaintive cry. Things were about to change.

144 First used in February 2008, but often thereafter. See http://www.51voa.com/VOA_Standard_English/VOA_Standard_English_19788.html

145 One senior officer who came with General McChrystal said, “one of the most striking things about what I found when I got to Kabul in the spring of 2009 was when I tracked down the Public Affairs officer for ISAF and found him sitting on a stoop outside a small brick building in the ISAF compound on a cell phone. It turned out the handful of PAOs at that time had no dedicated desk space and no reliable land lines.” [Personal exchange].

CHAPTER 4.14

GENERAL STANLEY MCCHRYSTAL, U.S. JUNE 2009 - JUNE 2010

*“ISAF is a conventional force that is poorly configured for [counterinsurgency], inexperienced in local languages and culture, and struggling with challenges inherent to coalition warfare. These intrinsic disadvantages are exacerbated by our current operational culture and how we operate.”*¹⁴⁶

*“StratCom makes a vital contribution to the overall effort, and more specifically, to the operational centre of gravity: the continued support of the Afghan population”.*¹⁴⁷

3 August 2009: NATO Allies agreed to adjust the ISAF upper command structure, including for a three-star HQ fully dedicated to tactical operations throughout Afghanistan, freeing COMISAF to engage more intensively with his Afghan and international partners.

20 August 2009: Afghan Presidential election. A dispute between UN Secretary General Special Representative Kai Eide and his deputy Peter Galbraith over the extent of election fraud leads Galbraith to leave his post the next month.

4 September 2009: Two disabled fuel trucks near Kunduz are destroyed when U.S. assets respond to a request for air support, killing more than 130 non-combatants. The explanations and handling of the incident lead the German Defence Minister, Chief of Defence and State Secretary for Defence to resign.¹⁴⁸

21 September 2009: *The Washington Post* publishes details of the McChrystal assessment, including a redacted version of the document.

Early November 2009: Secret dispatches of U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry are published, advising that increasing international forces in Afghanistan would not be a good strategy given that President Karzai “is not an adequate strategic partner,” and more U.S. forces would only create greater dependency.¹⁴⁹

1 December 2009: U.S. President Obama announces a force surge of 30,000.

February 2010: Afghan and ISAF partners initiate Operation Moshtarak, in southern Helmand province, the largest partnered major offensive to date, which began with the approval of President Karzai.

22 June 2010: *The Rolling Stone* article “The Runaway General” is released online.

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146 *COMISAF Initial Assessment*, 30 August 2009, p. 1-2.

147 *Ibid.* p. D-1.

148 The concern by the German colonel in charge of the Kunduz Operational Command Centre that night was that two stolen fuel tankers would be used by insurgents to support attacks on the PRTs or police stations. Initially, German officials denied any civilian casualties occurred. See Constantin Schübler, and Yee-Kuang Heng. “The Bundeswehr and the Kunduz air strike 4 September 2009: Germany’s post-heroic moment?” *European Security*, 22:3.

149 See <http://documents.nytimes.com/eikenberry-s-memos-on-the-strategy-in-afghanistan>

ISAF TOP ISSUES EXTERNAL	ISAF TOP ISSUES INTERNAL	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
ISAF casualty reporting and the revised tactical directive	Building common understanding of new mission: down-in, up-out	New COMISAF, leak of the McChrystal assessment, and discussions about force levels
Airstrikes/Afghan civilian casualties/Night raids	Building Info Ops, PSYOPS, Public Affairs capability at new ISAF Joint Command and structures	Presidential election and dispute within UNAMA
Afghan Presidential election	Expansion of counter-propaganda	Civilian and ISAF casualties
Countering the insurgent propaganda campaign	ISAF DCOSCOMM expansion, reconstitution and creating culture of StratCom throughout the command	Critical comments by President Karzai about ISAF operations

Mark Sedwill, in a May 2010 speech to Chatham House while still the NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Kabul, recalled that the situation when McChrystal assumed command “was serious and deteriorating: security was worsening, governance had flat-lined and only development was clearly improving.”¹⁵⁰ The insurgency had gained ground in the south and east, and had expanded into the north and west. Though massive aid monies and effort were finally having an effect on Afghan government revenues and resulting in notably better access to health care and education, the international largesse and the way that much of it was dispensed was serving to fuel corruption, and arguably strengthening the hand of tribal warlords and other malign actors.

As Sedwill explained, “But, to the Afghan villager what matters is security and the standard is elementary:

- can he get his goods to market without being robbed;
- can his wife go to the shops and is there anything to buy;
- can his kids go to school and is the school open;
- can he get a dispute with his neighbour resolved without paying a bribe;
- does he see a policeman as reassuring, threatening or useless?”¹⁵¹

The starkest expression of where the mission stood was a media briefing on May 11, 2009, by U.S. Secretary of Defense Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen at which they announced that COMISAF General McKiernan was being relieved of command, barely seven weeks after the President had set out a “comprehensive new strategy.”

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150 See http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_63616.htm?selectedLocale=en

151 Ibid.

As Secretary Gates put it, “first of all, I would say, nothing went wrong, and there was nothing specific.” There was by now an urgent and desperate desire for “getting fresh thinking, fresh eyes on the problem, and in how we implement the [March] strategy and the mission going forward,” Gates said. The very real concern about trends and the seeming lack of views or energy to set the mission on a more even keel was evident in the comments by Admiral Mullen that, “[I]n some ways, we’re learning as we go here ... I’d certainly want to hear from new leadership what their beliefs are once they get there, get on the ground and make some recommendations about how to move forward as rapidly as possible.” Secretary Gates added, “[T]hat’s the challenge that we give to the new leadership. How do we – how do we do better? What new ideas do you have? What fresh thinking do you have? Are there different ways of accomplishing our goals? How can we be more effective? The admiral and I aren’t the source of those ideas. General McChrystal and General Rodriguez are. And that’s what we expect from them.”¹⁵²

Thus it is not that McKiernan had done anything overtly and demonstrably wrong but that under his command not enough was happening that suggested things could go any more right, any faster. Many of the elements of a renewed focus on counterinsurgency including protecting the population and assisting capability and capacity building in the Afghan government were already goals but were not particularly well known outside the command. It can be fairly said that the mission was not widely and proactively communicated, it lacked forces, strategic narrative, energy and a sense of real, focused purpose. The overall communications effort was lackadaisical and was short on bench-strength, the commander a more reserved, less overtly outgoing style of general, certainly as compared to those who would follow him as COMISAF.

General McChrystal immediately drew together a ‘who’s who’ of learned minds to assist with the drafting of a theatre assessment to riddle through the next steps in the mission. “The president and I would rue the day I asked for that review,” wrote former Secretary Gates in his memoir.¹⁵³ The McChrystal assessment was stark and unambiguous: “Failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near-term (next 12 months) – while Afghan security capacity matures – risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible.”¹⁵⁴ This frank articulation of the war’s status and appreciation for what to do to turn the campaign around sent shock waves through the U.S. and NATO, and engendered a long period of careful reflection including

152 See <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4424>

153 Robert Gates (2014), p. 349.

154 *COMISAF Initial Assessment*, p. 1-2

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Almost eight years after the fall of the Taliban government, and six years after assuming ISAF lead, NATO forces finally had the right circumstances to reset the mission. For the first time, the mission status and needs were outlined in frank, honest and accessible language.

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how many additional forces would be needed. “It didn’t take a clairvoyant to see a train wreck coming,” wrote Gates. “The only time as secretary of defence that I was truly alarmed was when I heard what McChrystal intended.”¹⁵⁵

Almost eight years after the fall of the Taliban government, and six years after assuming ISAF lead, NATO forces finally had the right circumstances to reset the mission. For the first time, mission status and

needs were outlined in frank, honest and accessible language. It came with a cogent narrative that looked and sounded eminently reasonable (if expensive), and a detailed plan about what to do and what to change. It was supported by an influential, vocal stakeholder community that had helped draw up that plan, major new operational capabilities and very significant changes to how the mission would be communicated inside and outside the force. In time, it transformed how the mission operated and was perceived including elevating the role, focus and resourcing of the information campaign at ISAF HQ. Later that year, President Obama’s explanation of the U.S. policy review and the reasons behind the 30,000 force surge (+ 10,000 from NATO, it was hoped) added weight and force to the effort. Whether doubling-down on an all-in classic counterinsurgency campaign was the best choice for the time is still open to discussion, but there was no denying that the new combination of commanders had a strategy, plans, the will, and now – missing during McKiernan’s time in command – political and institutional support.

If momentum is a series of good things one after the other in close sequence, then in spite of the short-term pessimistic outlook in Afghanistan the elements for some hope were finally in evidence. The new commander had charisma, force of energy and personality driven in some measure by fawning media coverage, and came with a much larger, hand-picked team.

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155 Gates (2014), p. 353.

The burden of the Iraqi albatross continued to abate, freeing political actors to focus on the Afghan strategy with a heretofore unheard-of sense of purpose, and for key military enablers to shift theatres and augment ISAF. There was a new policy for new Commanders with the addition of a three-star HQ fully dedicated to managing the battle. Though he had been appointed in January 2009, Richard Holbrooke's efforts as a newly created U.S. Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan were now beginning to take shape and form. There was a new American Ambassador (Karl Eikenberry) with deep experience in Afghanistan and armed with significantly enhanced resources from the State Department. And there was a new and even more straight-talking NATO Secretary General, and months later, an experienced and connected NATO Senior Civilian Representative (Mark Sedwill). The NATO training mission had a successful first year: Afghan security forces exceeded their growth targets, implemented new programmes to raise quality and institutional capability, and improved training effectiveness. The UN looked to be getting on track under Kai Eide's leadership. There was more of everything - focus, energy, resources, interest, political and military support, and pressure to succeed. This all achieved what was intended, which was to generate momentum.

In addition, even the policy wheels at NATO were turning. The North Atlantic Council agreed to a NATO StratCom policy in September 2009, followed in short order by a more robust Allied Command Operations Directive on StratCom. And by early 2010 the first in what would become an annual series of Strategic Frameworks was issued setting out overarching guidance to inform and shape communication efforts throughout the NATO network.

Organisation. This period of command marks the real genesis of strategic communications in ISAF, and in NATO writ large. Remarkably, it was the *first time* since ISAF began that a professional communicator was set at the head of a conjoined effort that drew all the StratCom disciplines together under one umbrella.¹⁵⁶ The 'reset' button on the mission had been pushed, but it was going to take time. The McChrystal assessment was also unequivocal about establishing the centres of gravity as 'protecting the population' and 'confidence of Afghans in their own government and security forces' – a desire to have Afghans be part of a two-way conversation, not a one-way dialogue.

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 156 The kernel of ISAF StratCom had existed as far back as ISAF V under Lieutenant-General Hillier, who first put in place the construct of an experienced operator as a theatre-level information coordinator. From early-2004 to mid-2009 though, the coordination of communications effort was put under a succession of operators, none of whom it appears had any specific, communications-related qualifications for the task. Smith's successor, Rear-Admiral (one-star) Hal Pittman would be the last professional communicator to head StratCom in ISAF.

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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.

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Strategic Communications was expected to be a key operational component of that endeavour, and this would require a change of culture at ISAF HQ: “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.”¹⁵⁷

The re-energised and very publicly pronounced counterinsurgency effort with the focus squarely on words,

spirit and actions centred on the Afghan population put StratCom squarely at the heart of the campaign. This necessitated considerable organisational reform to position the function and obtain the resources, including the right talent. A Deputy Chief of Staff Communication (DCOSCOMM) directorate was created with all information-related capabilities at ISAF HQ put under command of the newly promoted Rear-Admiral (two-star) Greg Smith. Smith, a career U.S. Public Affairs officer, had spent a year in Baghdad in the challenging position of Director of Communication for the Multi-National Forces Iraq before being posted in June 2008 to U.S. Central Command, then headed by General Petraeus. Smith was weeks from retirement when he got a call from Admiral Mullen, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, telling him General McKiernan was out, and that Smith would be on a plane in five days headed to Kabul with McChrystal and other staff.

At CENTCOM, Smith oversaw communication efforts across the breadth of that command’s vast area of responsibility in the Middle East and much of Central and Southwest Asia, including Afghanistan. When the McChrystal mission reset occurred, Petraeus – who intuitively understood the imperative to concurrently re-boot the communications effort – dispatched his own Director of Communication in May 2009 to lead it. As such, Smith became the first (and only, as it turned out) two-star professional communicator to serve in either the Iraq or Afghanistan wars, and ended up serving in Afghanistan

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157 COMISAF Initial Assessment, p. D-2.

in the top communications job until March 2011, for 22 consecutive months. “The direct support of Generals Petraeus and McChrystal, and Admiral Mullen was the key to building both the team and the processes,” said Smith. “I will also be the first to admit that I leaned on the U.S. for the people, but I really had no choice, as nations provided far too little support when it came to talent, resources or doctrine.”¹⁵⁸

The McChrystal assessment identified more than a dozen key lines of StratCom effort along a broad front of activities. These included winning the battle of perceptions, with a focus on highlighting the revised tactical directive that described how and when lethal force should be used, refocusing media efforts to a 24/7 operation, delegating information release authorities, and a change of perspective from ‘win hearts and minds’ to ‘give trust and confidence in Afghan institutions’, and building Afghan capacity and capability. This was designed to “help ensure that the Government of Afghanistan receives the necessary partnering, assistance, training and equipment to further develop their own capacity and improve performance,” and to see that it was “placed at the forefront of all possible endeavours with its credibility enhanced.”¹⁵⁹

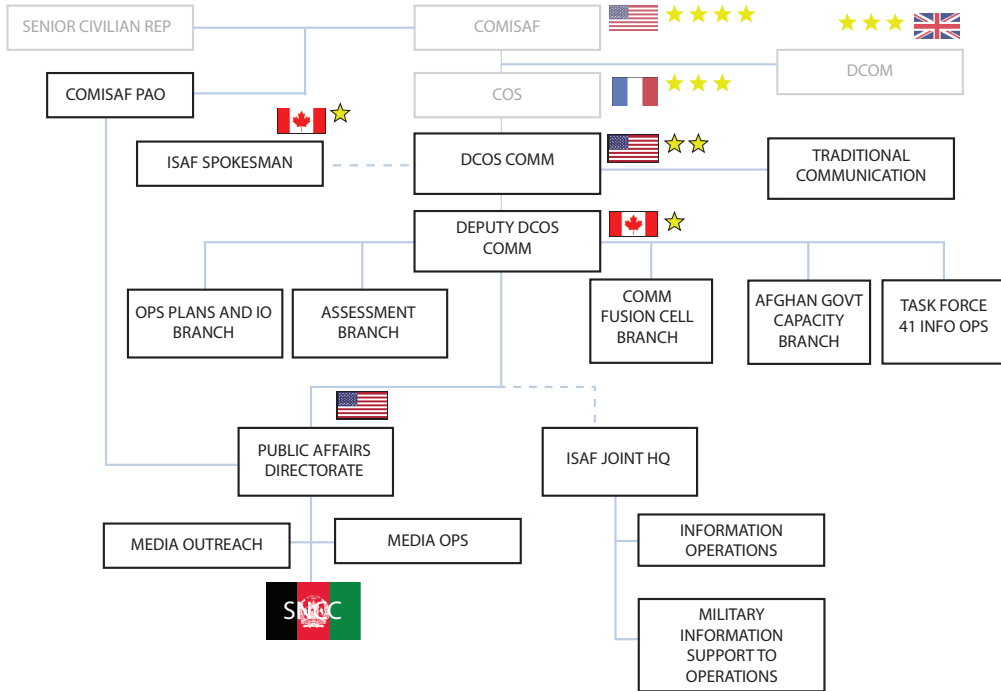
In short order, the StratCom piece was markedly different. The structure changed from an ineffectual one-star Director StratCom and Strategic Effects plus a one-star Spokesperson, neither with a communications-specific background, to a structure initially of two but eventually five persons of general rank,¹⁶⁰ from summer 2009 including the two-star communicator Smith, and who was now of equal rank as the Deputy Chiefs of Staff for Operations, Intelligence, and Support. Deputy DCOS Communication, and Director Public Affairs positions were created in addition to continuing the practice of a general officer as Spokesperson. In a multi-national HQ where rank counts, ISAF HQ in effect made communications an equal partner and not just on paper, a very strong signal indeed of Command purpose. The addition of the ISAF Joint Command HQ also allowed a new-found focus ‘up and out’ at ISAF HQ while having oversight on the ‘down and in’.

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158 Those who may be unfamiliar with the course of events regarding "that story" know that the idea to host a Rolling Stone reporter for a portion of McChrystal's outreach effort was the initiative of a civilian advisor, who was let go/resigned immediately after the story broke.

159 As well, it called on ISAF to improve performance in the following areas: expand reach of messaging; offensive Info Ops; incident response; counter-IED Info Ops focus; StratCom capacity; Unity of Command and Unity of Effort; declassification of imagery; links with intelligence organisations; new media and availability of communication (in Afghanistan, with a focus on cell phone and radio); and, relationships with *COMISAF Initial Assessment*, p. D-3-5.

160 Initially, the Spokesman and Deputy DCOSCOMM were double-hatted; later in 2010 they would be separated, with a Director StratCom Operations/Plans as well as a rear-admiral (one-star) to head Public Affairs, for a total of 5 general officers in the StratCom grouping.

Figure 8: ISAF HQ Deputy Chief Of Staff Communication Structure, Summer 2009



Conduct. “When we first got there, it was a bit of a mess,” recalled a senior American Public Affairs officer who was in at the start of the McChrystal command. “CJPOTF was totally out there on their own, and Info Ops was just not equipped to be a coordinator of anything. We had all these new elements to stand up and support including the NATO Training Mission - Afghanistan, the Detention Operations Task Force, the new ISAF Joint Command HQ, and to build in the U.S. OEF force.”¹⁶¹

The campaign themes of ‘security’ (protect the population, enable the Afghan National Security Forces, neutralise malign influence) and ‘stability’ (support extension of governance and socio-economic development) were not new, but under the changed circumstances of new leadership they had a new resonance. The active distribution of a pithy commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance was popular. Media and commentators were briefed about the new strategy with considerable emphasis put on the revised tactical directive, a serious effort to reduce NATO-caused civilian casualties.

NATO HQ initiatives began to take effect with increased interest in Transatlantic Opinion Leader and Media Opinion Leader visits. And, importantly, the

contributors to the effort to refine and reshape the new policy continued to be active participants in the communication campaign back home.

In reasonably short order the communications surge led by experienced senior officers began to put in place the policies and procedures needed to integrate and orchestrate a theatre-wide StratCom effort. Communication strategies became nested within a campaign plan. Strategic narratives were developed that defined and described communications objectives around campaign themes mainly focused on ‘up and out’ objectives including to win the understanding and active support for the mission, protect the mission, demonstrate sustainable (security/stability) progress, and counter the insurgent’s propaganda. ‘Down and in’ objectives included support to the legitimate efforts of the Afghan government, to influence the Afghan government to reform and to neutralise malign influence. The McChrystal command was not the first to understand that ISAF was hardly going to be perceived by the Afghan population as a trustworthy, credible voice, as opposed to the population accepting the force, or being modestly appreciative, but it was the first to truly recognise and *accept* it. As a result they sought “every opportunity to encourage and fortify the Afghan government’s engagement with the people in order to strengthen its credibility and serve the enduring centre of gravity - the confidence of the Afghan people in their Government,” said Smith.

Insurgents continued to effectively use violence and threats of violence to intimidate Afghans. This was *their* form of strategic communication, along with efforts to highlight Afghan government weakness, corruption and predation. Combined with a significant technical capability across all communication means including SMS, video, Internet, print and radio, it served to reduce confidence in all levels of Afghan government. There were limited opportunities to engage with Afghans in a broad and systematic way, in part due to the security constraints and restrictions governing movement. At this stage, there was little real understanding and appreciation of the Afghan condition though this was being greatly improved with a Communication Fusion Cell established to identify and collect all information gained and gleaned from as many sources as possible to assist rapid response, long-term assessment and planning, and to share information across civilian-military organisations. It drew on the information fusion cells at the Regional Command HQ/Joint Operations Centres as well as at the ISAF Joint Command, the Human Terrain Teams, PRTs, and organisations including USAID – in short, from any place where quality information and data could be had to inform strategy, plans and messaging.

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In reasonably short order the communications surge led by experienced senior officers began to put in place the policies and procedures needed to integrate and orchestrate a theatre-wide StratCom effort.

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There remained limited opportunity for partnership with Afghans at ISAF HQ (less a problem at the Regional Commands, with many being hired for the local-information ‘atmospherics’ program, or to assist with radio or TV). ISAF continued to try to develop means of outreach to Afghan partners to influence attitudes and behaviours but its ability to connect with local audiences could not compete with that of the insurgents. Importantly, the Afghan government

still massively lacked the capability and capacity to plan and conduct its own coordinated, calibrated communications. The Government Media Information Centre was taking shape and form and being used more frequently but absent a practised communications support infrastructure throughout the country, results were modest. The ability to facilitate greater ownership and responsibility for managing their own communications like every other sector in Afghanistan was constrained by overall institutional capacity, including a lack of people and physical infrastructure. In addition, connectivity between district, provincial and central governments remained spotty at best.

The Afghan government’s inability to regularly communicate strategically put the burden to do so on ISAF. This situation informed a strategy to enhance the capacity of the country to give voice to as many Afghans as possible. The Info Ops Task Force reporting to HQ ISAF focused on enabling communication capability for ISAF, the Afghan security forces and the international community, with major investments in cellular towers, radio and television. As Smith explains, the value of the capacity building effort was not to promote more NATO voices, but to promote more *Afghan* voices – the credible voice– to enable conversations in the first place. A major priority was assisting the counter-propaganda effort with FM radio, TV expansion and cell tower construction. In the cognitive domain, efforts focused mainly on anything ‘counter’– propaganda, IEDs, narco-terrorism, corruption.

The ISAF Joint Command Info Ops Directorate, almost staffed exclusively with American assets, focused on Key Leader Engagements.

The Info Ops effort became more joined-up with the significant American assets under Operation Enduring Freedom more integrated into the ISAF Joint Command/ISAF HQ effort. All of the ISAF assets were being supported with products including the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, the OEF coalition, NATO Special Forces and the Detention Operations Task Force, as well as several major Afghan ministries. Enhanced efforts using traditional communications began, primarily through the Afghan religious and tribal elder communities that had been severely marginalised under Taliban rule, and by facilitating more face-to-face initiatives to listen to and learn of Afghan concerns.

Internal communications was also a major focus for McChrystal.¹⁶² “We also kick-started command information,” recalled a senior U.S. Public Affairs officer, “with about \$3M disbursed for video and still equipment. Money was not an object. NATO TV was also awesome, they produced some high quality stuff for us, we relied on them a lot.”¹⁶³ The initiative was necessary because it was very clear that not everybody had “received the memo” about the revised tactical directive and a considerable number of civilian casualty incidents still took place that called upon the skills, talents and patience of the staff and commander to deal with events as they occurred.

The directive became the lightning rod for major differences of opinion within the (mainly U.S.) force about the role and place of population-centred counterinsurgency. Leading military officers of the time balked and seethed that the restrictions gave real advantage to the Taliban: a future commander of the NATO training mission believed that the tactical directive cost many American lives, a direct result he later wrote, of “constant Karzai carping about civilian casualties”; “the supposed horrors of civilian casualties and night raids”; and that “McChrystal mistook Karzai’s daily bleatings for the views of Afghan villagers ... Afghans would never love ISAF but they might well fear and respect the occupiers.”¹⁶⁴

Colonel Harry Tunnell, a Stryker Task Force commander (the ‘Destroyer Brigade’) whose unit suffered disproportionate casualties having spent one year in theatre unhappily serving under British command in the South,¹⁶⁵ was scathing.

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162 This imperative and effort to communicate more directly with the large, dispersed force is well documented in his memoir, *My Share of the Task* (2014).

163 Interview.

164 Bolger, *Why We Lost* (2014).

165 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *The War Within the War for Afghanistan*, 2012.



*General Stanley McChrystal listens to District Governor Habib Ullah, Helmand Province, 2010.
Photo: U.S. Department of Defense*

On his return to the U.S. in summer 2010 to face investigation for the aggressive nature of his unit, he wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Army expressing his views on the counterinsurgency effort: “We have developed a cadre of senior leaders so informed by the historically inaccurate idea that a population can be a centre of gravity that we are unwilling to conduct operations that reflect sound military art and science ... we are a chronic failure as a military force because of COIN dogma.”¹⁶⁶

Protecting the population was the key part of the NATO narrative and would remain a challenging exercise in the face of the raging counterinsurgency and the slow but accelerating pace of Afghan National Security Forces reform. Expectations were high and demanded careful attention. The wide array of players and actors in theatre militated against seamless liaison. The hope that the UN could be the glue to bind it all together was dealt a huge setback with the very public internecine leadership spat following the Afghan Presidential election. Still, the ISAF Communication Directorate started investing in more outreach to Afghan institutions and international organisations. The Senior Civilian Representative’s Office, now armed with experienced and consistent communications staffing, was becoming a more active contributor in evaluating key regional players and in identifying public diplomacy opportunities of interest.

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All the elements for StratCom as a single organisational entity that integrated the effort of many information-related disciplines in a combat environment started to come together and stood in marked contrast to the commands before.

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The overall guidance and direction brought more discipline to subordinate units' inputs for reporting requirements and frequency. Themes and messages became more completely embedded in all communications activities. An extensive battle rhythm to coordinate the many moving parts became increasingly refined, including with UNAMA, the Afghan government, and with CENTCOM.

Public affairs efforts became more nimble and while

attentive still to Western troop contributing nation audiences, increasingly focused on the needs of Afghan media. “At first, we didn't even have reliable translation or interpretation capability, and for long periods we couldn't even get transcripts of Afghan TV for days,” recalls an American senior Public Affairs officer. “McChrystal flattened the structure. He sat at a U-shaped table at the front. When we had an issue we could go right to him, say ‘here's what we've got’, and get a decision immediately. You had direct access anytime you needed it. That's how we were able to react much faster.”¹⁶⁷

The officer estimated about 100 international reporters were in theatre at any one time. “Initially our decision-cycle was 6-8 hours, and we were getting our butts kicked. We would spend most of our day trying to trace down information about an incident, particularly any report of an Afghan civilian casualty. By a couple of months into the new structure, we were doing better, mainly in Regional Command (East), where eventually we were then able to pretty quickly say, ‘here's what happened,’ and get that into the media space.” The addition of the ISAF Joint Command with its additional resources allowed public affairs efforts to become a 24/7 operation and be guided by a “first with the truth” mantra, supplemented by Spokesperson outreach and media support centres in Kabul, Kandahar and Bagram.

It was a robust effort to define outcomes, align actions, and draw on a network of assessments to inform strategy and product, thereby yielding effective communication. That is not to say that it was without many bumps along the way, nor was it free. In all, the resource bill in the first year was about \$265M U.S. (including the Info Ops Task Force provided by the U.S. for \$190M; Counter-IED and PSYOPS (U.S.) for \$53M, CJPOTF PSYOPS (NATO) for \$21M) and 175 uniformed resources at ISAF (82 for Public Affairs, 63 for Info Ops, and 29 for StratCom).¹⁶⁸ As a senior Public Affairs officer recalled, “we went from an office of about 12 that could barely manage, to one several months later with 54 Public Affairs Officers alone. It didn’t happen overnight, but it did happen.”¹⁶⁹

The reforms and changes in the communications domain unquestionably made a considerable difference in the effort with troop contributing nations, and especially with Afghans. Still, the operation was butting up against the hard reality that few of the underlying conditions for fundamental positive change were any more in evidence including in counter-narcotics, development, the security situation, the level of corruption, the ability of the Afghan government to provide essential services at the provincial and district levels, or justice and rule of law reform. More Afghans were being killed than before, the majority by far by anti-government elements, but it was hard for the ‘average person’ to differentiate since the mere presence of NATO troops was a harbinger at least initially of problems to come as battles were joined.

During McChrystal’s command, all the elements for StratCom as a single organisational entity that integrated the effort of many information-related disciplines in a combat environment started to come together and stood in marked contrast to the commands before. Armed with a campaign strategy, resources on the ground, command support, public attention and interest, and a communication group at sufficient rank that was trained and resourced, there was a chance for success. *All these elements needed to occur together* – any one of them on their own would not have been sufficient. If the outcome was still uncertain, at least now there was the sense that there was a plan that could be understood and publicly explained, that leadership was in place to drive it, and the resources to fuel it were coming, supported by empowered communications to let that all be known.

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168 Rear-Admiral Greg Smith, "ISAF Briefing to Canadian Public Affairs Community," 16 December 2009.

169 Interview.

CHAPTER 4.15

JULY 2010 - JULY 2011 COMISAF GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS, U.S.

“Just work out who the bad guys are, and PSYOPS them.”

Direction from U.S. one-star general (Operations), to StratCom team

“The Strategic Communications piece needs to be led by people [operators] who understand strategy, not by professional communicators.”

A general officer who served in StratCom at the time

25 July 2010: Whistleblower website Wikileaks publishes 75,000 secret documents about the war in Afghanistan: *Der Spiegel*, *the Guardian* and *The New York Times* are partners in the information release.

1 August 2010: Dutch troops pull out of the mission.

16 August 2010: President Karzai calls on all non-military security agencies to leave the country within four months. This decree is subsequently made less strident.

August 2010: Counter-corruption Task Force Shafafiyat, (Task Force Transparency) is established to better understand the scope and scale of the problem and to ensure that money spent by ISAF is delivering its intended purpose.

Summer 2010: Kabul bank crisis brings entire Afghan financial system to near collapse.

18 September 2010: Parliamentary polls marred by Taliban violence, widespread fraud and a long delay in announcing results.

September 2010: NATO troop surge is complete in Afghanistan.

19-20 November 2010: Lisbon Summit.

2 May 2011: Osama Bin Laden is killed in Pakistan.

22 June 2011: The “Drawdown Speech”: President Obama orders 10,000 U.S. troops out by year’s end and 23,000 more by July 2012, with a turn-over to Afghan forces in 2014.

ISAF TOP ISSUES EXTERNAL	ISAF TOP ISSUES INTERNAL	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES
Message coordination with Govt of Afghanistan communications efforts and officials	Establishing common understanding of what StratCom is and how to make it work amongst ISAF staff	WikiLeaks revelations, mainly related to previously 'unannounced' incidents resulting in civilian casualties
Message coordination between NATO troop contributing nations	Information-sharing between ISAF HQ and various organisations under ISAF command	Fighting intensifies, and NATO casualties
Promoting the Afghan National Security Forces	Effecting good balance of responsibilities and trust relationship amongst all NATO practitioners	President Karzai's increasingly strident views about the conduct and impact of NATO forces
Reconciliation and Reintegration process	Firewalls amongst StratCom practitioners particularly Public Affairs and PSYOPS	

Context. The increase in force levels led inevitably to another violent year all around with the trend lines for casualties amongst civilians, ISAF and Afghan forces (and presumably, also for the Taliban) all headed up as they had year-over-year. By August 2010 the Afghan National Security Forces had grown to 243,000 personnel; NATO forces were at almost 120,000; U.S. defence department contractors were almost as numerous at 112,000; and the number of U.S. government civilians in theatre had doubled to 1,050 (from 524 the year before).¹⁷⁰ It was a very busy operational space and 2010 marked the deadliest year for NATO in the ISAF campaign with 711 killed in action – 499 U.S. and 212 from other contributing nations. Comparatively, the U.S. death toll was three times the number killed in Iraq in 2009, and 12 times the number killed there in 2010.¹⁷¹ The main focus of the military and the civilian effort, certainly in the case of the U.S., had shifted to Afghanistan.

Even after the expenditure of all this blood and treasure, conditions on the ground remained unsettled. In March 2010 the latest UN Security Council Resolution recognised “the increased threats posed by the Taliban, Al-Qaida and other extremist groups.” and expressed concern in particular about the increase in violence “by the Taliban, Al-Qaida, illegally armed groups, criminals and those involved in the narcotics trade, and the increasingly strong links between terrorism activities and illicit drugs ...”¹⁷²

170 Brookings Institute, *Afghanistan Index*, November 11, 2011.

171 <http://icasualties.org/>

172 <http://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/security-council-extends-mandate-united-nations-assistance-mission-afghanistan>

Still, at the Lisbon Summit in November the NATO Secretary General, the UN Secretary General and President Karzai were all of like mind: while the process would be conditions- not calendar-based, they believed the situation would improve enough to allow a transfer of responsibility to Afghan security forces by the end of 2014.¹⁷³

The communications effort in theatre continued to focus on the three-fold aim of increasing public perceptions of legitimacy for both NATO/ISAF and the Afghan government, undermining insurgent messaging, and inspiring the Afghan population to play an increasingly active role in their own security, governance and development. After a tour of almost two years, Rear-Admiral (2-star) Greg Smith turned Deputy Chief of Staff Communication (DCOSCOMM) responsibilities over to another highly experienced U.S. Public Affairs Officer, Rear-Admiral (1-star) Hal Pittman (who had also replaced Smith at CENTCOM) – and who went on to serve a year in Afghanistan under Generals Petraeus and Allen. Pittman would be the second, and last, professional communicator to lead the ISAF StratCom effort; he was followed at the end of his tour by three one-star operators in succession.

By this time the ISAF communications campaign was without question the largest, most diverse and most complicated in any NATO operation. For the first time the Alliance was fighting an active and resourceful insurgency with its own effective Info Ops campaign. The scale, scope and pace of activity, as can be imagined from the key events timeline, did not allow for much downtime. The StratCom organisation had been in place for almost two years, had been tested under a considerable range of issues, conditions and personalities, and was due for an outside review. In June 2011, a staff assistance visit (SAV) was requested by COMISAF and a five-person team co-sponsored by U.S. Southern Command and Central Command was dispatched to examine the integration of Public Affairs and Info Ops planning processes, and to make recommendations on best practices.

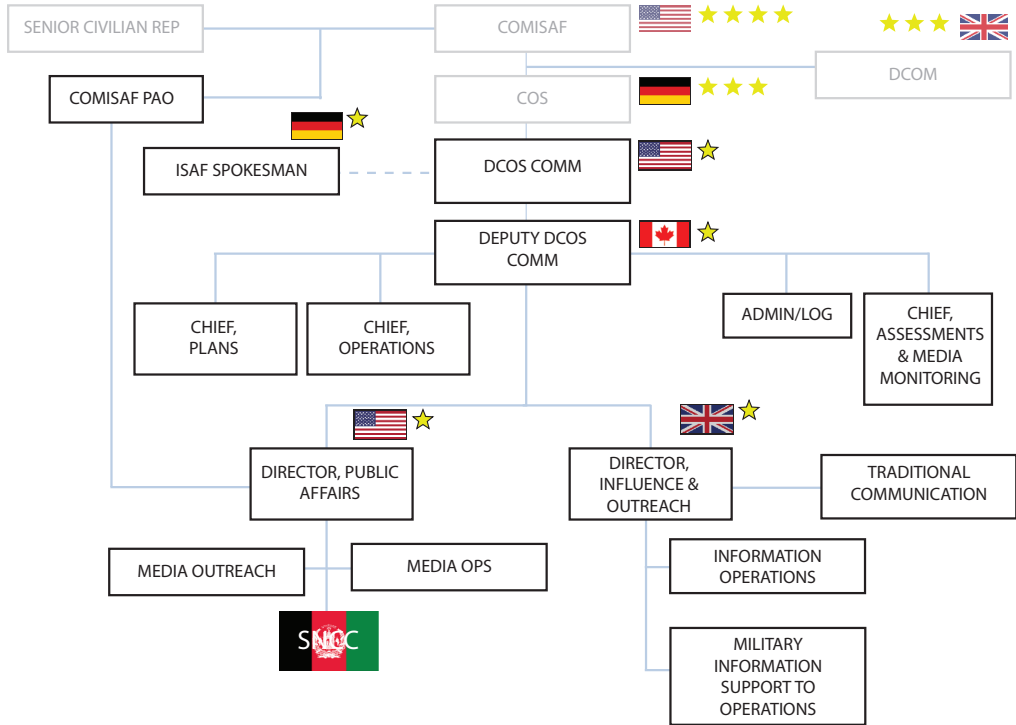
The team met with most of ISAF's strategic-level organisations, the Afghan government's ministries of Information and Defence, the Government Media Information Centre, and the U.S. and Canadian embassies. The group presented their findings to the ISAF Deputy Commander, DCOSCOMM and key staff in mid-June 2011.¹⁷⁴ The SAV report serves as particularly useful insight into the inner workings of the organisation at the time, and this chapter details its key observations. The chapter is also supplemented by practitioner interviews or exchanges with six senior officers who served in StratCom at ISAF HQ

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173 Tri-party news conference at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_68929.htm

174 A copy of the report and an interview was graciously provided to this author by a member of the staff assistance visit team.

or the ISAF Joint Command HQ during the HF command period. Figure 9 shows the structure in mid-2010, shortly after Petraeus arrived in theatre and after the switch between Smith and Pittman as communication heads.

Figure 9: ISAF HQ Deputy Chief Of Staff Communication Structure, Mid-2010



By summer 2010 the StratCom group had morphed over time into an organisation with five, one-star general officers:

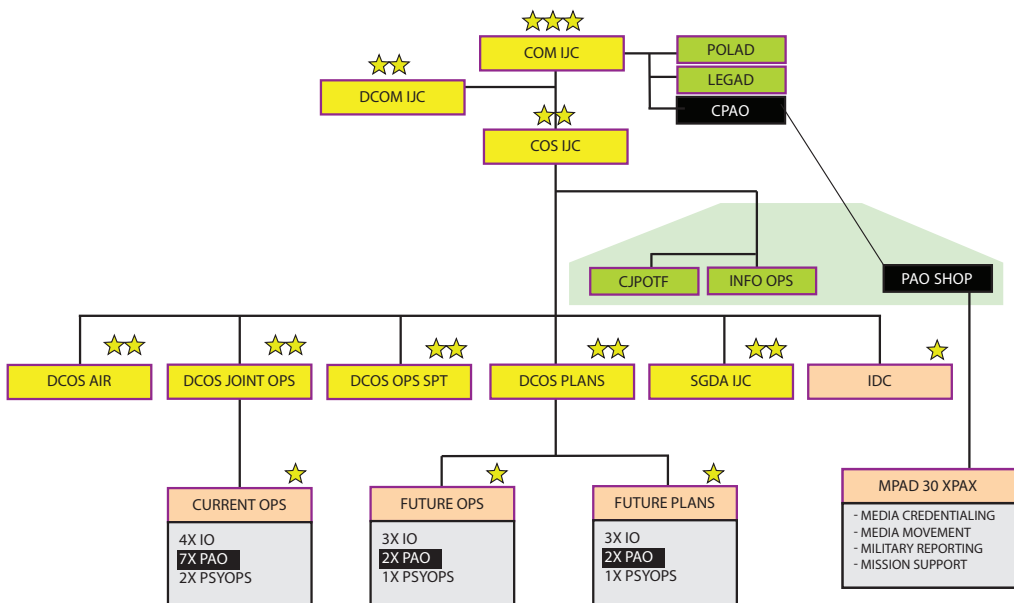
- Deputy Chief of Staff Communication - U.S.
- Deputy Deputy Chief of Staff Communication - CAN
- ISAF Spokesperson - GER
- Director Influence and Outreach - UK
- Director Public Affairs - U.S.

An organisation chart-by-chart comparison with summer 2009 would suggest that by mid-2011 there was relatively less capacity for engagements with military organisations and others outside ISAF, as well as less information assessment capability, though more emphasis (by virtue of rank) put on Influence and

Outreach activities with a focus on traditional communications, and on the means to effect more cross-functional coordination. At ISAF HQ, all the communication and information-related capabilities were co-located in one building.

At the ISAF Joint Command HQ, the Communication Division was meant to be run by a one-star general operator from a non-U.S. country. Uniquely, two experienced American colonels from Public Affairs and Info Ops respectively agreed to co-lead the group with Public Affairs remaining a separate function under the Command Group. During two subsequent tour iterations, Spanish one-stars served as Deputy Chief of Staff Communication. Figure 10 details the ISAF Joint Command Communication Directorate structure.¹⁷⁵

Figure 10: ISAF Joint Command HQ Communication Directorate, 2010-11



Overall Organisation. The SAV review concluded that combining the communications disciplines into one Deputy Chief of Staff for Communication organisation created “unity of purpose,” while still maintaining doctrinal boundaries with Public Affairs. This was beneficial in view of the range of issues afoot, the many communication and information capabilities at ISAF’s disposal, the breadth of target audiences, the number of major ISAF organisations on multiple lines of operation (including the NATO Training Mission and the Detention/Rule of Law Task Force that generated a lot of media interest), and thus the potential for information fratricide. Although “the job was getting done” was a common refrain, unity of command was

deemed important to “align, guide and shape their outputs toward common effects.” This picks up on the main theme identified even from the SAV Terms of Reference, of a need for more effective, integrated operations planning support at ISAF HQ from Public Affairs and Info Ops.

At ISAF Joint Command HQ, the Ops and Plans functions were supported by the integration of Public Affairs and Info Ops into cross-functional teams, each retaining functional authority and taking technical direction from the senior Public Affairs officer and senior Info Ops officer. Thus doctrinal integrity was maintained and at the same time providing integrated planning support. This arrangement worked well for the team illustrating again that a variety of structures can be successful provided the right combination of personalities with proven experience are committed to making it work.

It is one thing to say that ‘influence’ is more important than rank, but in a large multi-national HQ with constant demands on leaders’ time and finite resources, rank counts. The Deputy Chief of Staff Communication position had been downgraded from a 2- to 1-star on the change-over of personnel. This was due mainly to the inability of *any* NATO military to provide and sustain at general/flag officer rank, a sufficiently experienced 1- star, let alone a 2-star practitioner to lead the function. Notwithstanding, the presence of five one-stars in the directorate was helpful, particularly in an HQ that like most international HQs, was prone to rank and size inflation.

Deputy Deputy Chief Staff Communication Position. The situation of a one-star Deputy Deputy and a one-star Deputy might have proven awkward anywhere else but at ISAF. The number of senior-level meetings and variety of DCOS-wide issues, the SAV report noted, suggested that the rank and position be retained but the position re-cast with particular emphasis on managing issues related to staffing, highlighting the particular challenge of that aspect in such a hybrid organisation.

Info Ops. Info Ops faced a real challenge as to how to divide tasks between ISAF and ISAF Joint Command HQ, with the potential confusion of authorities, manpower and activity.¹⁷⁶ At the time there was also considerable discussion afoot within the senior communication staff at ISAF HQ about the role and place of Info Ops, one view being that as far as activities in theatre went, Info Ops should report to the Deputy Chief of Staff Operations and

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 176 Similar circumstances and issues of coordination were faced by NATO in the IFOR/SFOR campaign, with a four- star strategic HQ and a three-star operational HQ just a short drive from each other in Sarajevo.

that “theatre” StratCom should be subordinated to it.¹⁷⁷ The SAV view was given the substantial resources about to flow into theatre as a result of the impending deployment of a U.S. Army Corps as framework unit, that all Info Ops activities should migrate down to the ISAF Joint Command HQ excepting traditional communication. This line of activity was recommended to stay at the strategic level in the light of the associated sensitivities, special security requirements and relationships established at the ministerial level.

The SAV team looked at the prospect of integrating Info Ops with the Deputy Chief of Staff Operations as a means of achieving the desired level of integrated planning across Current and Future Operations staff at ISAF HQ (given that it worked well at the subordinate HQ). In the end, the view was that while this would certainly be beneficial to the Info Ops-Operations planning relationship it would not best support the needs of the other Deputy Chiefs of Staff or military entities outside ISAF HQ that benefited from StratCom support. The recommendation was to keep Info Ops under the StratCom structure, and take steps instead to enhance the planning function: shortly thereafter, in direct response to this observation the Director Influence and Outreach position was changed to Director StratCom Operations/Plans and Info Ops, with a concomitant minor re-arrangement of functions.¹⁷⁸

The majority of Info Ops personnel at all command levels at the time relied mainly on individual augmentees, and the SAV report notes that “most of the [augmentees] do not receive the proper level of pre-deployment training and school house preparation prior to arrival in country (usually a one week course).” One week! As one senior officer from ISAF Joint Command HQ put it, “StratCom guidance was a distraction at best and more often an obstacle since most of the planning guidance came from an untrained pick-up team, approved by a leadership with little or no MISO/PSYOP experience.”

In terms of training, the situation at the Military Information Support Operations (MISO) Task Force was considerably better, coming as it did as a formed battalion-sized unit, providing an “established chain of command, standardised processes and procedures, as well as tailored individual/collective pre-deployment training.” According to the SAV report, products were approved and disseminated without issue, with the Deputy Chief of Staff Communication having designated release authority. The SAV report is silent about the quality or impact of the PSYOPS products though as one

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177 Interview with a one-star within StratCom at the time. The SAV report in fact does frequently hint at doctrinal disarray at this point, with national proclivities causing issues of inter-functional coordination.

178 To include MISO/PSYOPS Task Force (180 personnel), Info Ops Special Capabilities (6), Traditional Communication (5-8), StratCom Plans (3-5), StratCom Ops (2-3), and Assessments (4-6).

first-hand one-star source recalled – to illustrate a point about a lack of real understanding of the audience – “Sixty to seventy per cent of the products were laughed at by Afghans, and thirty to forty per cent were laughed at by us.”

Processes. A variety of means in a crowded battle space provided opportunity to coordinate and synchronise communication activities at ISAF HQ, including within the HQ itself and with its subordinate operational HQ, Central Command, and with UNAMA and the government of Afghanistan. Still, at this stage of the mission, a surprising SAV finding is that ISAF “does not convene a consolidated board or working group that synchronises communication activities with other ISAF capabilities to achieve a desired effect.” While a StratCom Coordination Board existed, it apparently was not a dedicated forum chaired or co-chaired with the Operations or Communication Deputy Chiefs of Staff (one suggestion is that the different ranks were a factor) to gain visibility of all ISAF operations and activities, and be able to prioritise, sequence and synchronise plans, operations, and activities to realise maximum effect.” This situation, the SAV report noted, limited “ability to fast-track emergent issues.”

Key Leader Engagement (KLE). The SAV report notes that “the discussion of KLE transcended almost every meeting, underscoring both its perceived importance and the breadth of engagement.” The dissatisfaction with KLE outcomes was a point of consensus amongst this report’s contributors as well, one referring to it as a “massive failure” although the concern over process was much more pronounced at ISAF HQ than at the ISAF Joint Command HQ. No explicit reason is given for that. Key leaders were often targeted by multiple general/flag officers, these interventions often occurring without an ‘engagement plan’ and with limited reporting back thereafter, apparently at this point in time, without there being an effective tracking mechanism or a process to share assessments. “Soldiers engage with bullets, but two-stars and above engage with talking points,” noted a SAV report interviewee. Most engagements at the two-star level and up seem to have been tracked but not coordinated, and not even conclusively tracked for the one-stars which was problematic given their sheer number, and that their work often brought them into contact with senior Afghan interlocutors outside the HQ.

It was a very crowded space. The establishment of a three-star HQ created an opportunity to share responsibilities, with ISAF Joint Command HQ focused on ‘down and in’ with line ministries and with the four-star ISAF focused ‘up and out’, particularly in Kabul, with the President’s office, key ministers and top officials. The Senior Civilian Representative’s office also had an important part in this effort, particularly with respect to relations with Afghan parliamentarians

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At this stage of the mission, a surprising SAV finding is that ISAF “does not convene a consolidated board or working group that synchronises communication activities with other ISAF capabilities to achieve a desired effect.”

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and ministers, and de-confliction was necessary. Though the KLE function reported to a 2-star Deputy Chief of Staff, it was reportedly under-resourced and not led or championed at the top of the chain of command. By the end of the year it had moved from Deputy Chief of Staff Strategic Partnering to the ISAF Chief of Staff office though it remained a point of dissatisfaction for subsequent command tours.

Much military biography of the time notes this commander’s gift for and attention to outreach. “General Petraeus would invite groups of people to dinner once a week including politicians, government workers, ministers, Ambassadors, visiting VIPs, military commanders,” recalled Brigadier-General Christine Whitecross, the Deputy Deputy Chief of Staff Communication throughout this command. “A number of his staff would also attend to round out the people at the table depending on who was invited and what the message was that he wanted to pass on. As a general officer I was invited a number of times. It was masterful; the manner in which he would guide a conversation around to the message he had wanted to instil, and the way in which he was able to ensure that it would be passed was brilliant.”

Personnel Continuity. The report highlighted issues of personnel continuity, and that with the exception of the MISO/PSYOPS Task Force, “there is a consistent lack of qualified personnel across all sections/disciplines,” a situation that was attributed in large measure to there not being a full-time administrative person to attend to the various complexities of staffing in a multi-national HQ such as ISAF. Public Affairs was assessed as ‘optimally sourced’ throughout 2011, assisted by the expeditionary (U.S.) civilian component that provided staff across multiple ISAF commands where U.S. leadership dominated. Further, the short length of most NATO deployments and the variable skill levels amongst practitioners from different countries inhibited the effort: in contrast, “the enemy had the advantage of having

deep, lasting relationships, and they were in the operational space forever,” said Pittman.

Intelligence. The SAV report found significant issues with intelligence support, and this was reflected in participant interviews: “Intelligence was a real problem,” said a one-star in the Communication shop, “whose sole purpose seemed to be pretty pictures plus situational awareness for COMISAF, the priority task being to produce slides for the morning brief. There was no perception analysis or assessment of influence activities at all.” Of particular note was the perennial refrain of “over-classification of U.S. intelligence and operational products [that] hinders common understanding of the information environment,” noted the SAV team. More than a year after Major-General Flynn excoriated the intelligence function in his own report, the SAV team noted that Deputy Chief of Staff Intelligence still “does not have cells and sections that focus on human factors and atmospheric.” While stopping short of recommending that intelligence staff be embedded in StratCom, the team identified a lack of a “habitual and formalised support relationship.” This perennial problem suggests consideration for a Communications Information Fusion Cell or equivalent, or to integrate StratCom assets within the intelligence function (or vice versa).

Interagency/Command Liaison. The SAV team’s main critical finding was in this area – the view being that outside liaison particularly to troop contributing nation embassies and other ISAF subordinate assets such as the NATO Training Mission - Afghanistan, was wanting. Embassies in particular, the team found, had difficulty navigating through the chain of command to know who was responsible for what, and who it was they were meant to contact. Of note, these criticisms did not apply to the well-received outreach efforts including partnering with the Ministers of Religious Affairs, Information/Culture, and Border/Tribal Affairs to advance traditional communication efforts. In addition, initiatives such as the launch of a sports diplomacy program in partnership with the Afghan National Olympic Committee, U.S. Embassy, U.S. sports organisations and NGO partners, had positive global resonance.

Inter-StratCom Discipline Relationships. The SAV report points to some uneasy partnering at times amongst the various StratCom disciplines and the operational staff. The fact that the grouping was led by a Public Affairs officer was singled out by some for criticism because of the perception of an overt focus on the Public Affairs ‘current operations’ timeline thereby short-changing planning for longer-term event horizons such as for Info Ops and PSYOPS. “Eighty per cent was the friction of the HQ rather than delivering operational effect,” said a one-star director.

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While stopping short of recommending that intelligence staff be embedded in StratCom, the team identified a lack of a “habitual and formalised support relationship.”

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“This got better but it took months and different changes of personality. Structure goes a long way to solving problems.” More than one commentator observed that the challenge was due in part to the different reporting structures in the HQs.

Others, such as Colonel Hans Bush, the ISAF Joint Command Chief Public Affairs Officer during 2010-11, did not share those views saying, “I would not agree that the 2010/2011 Deputy Chief of Staff Communication

model was successful. Other than public affairs and some CJPOTF product execution, I did not really observe any successful information campaign. The situation truly got worse with the layering of flag officers with no Info Ops/Public Affairs experience in the years to follow. The disjointed nature of planning and guidance between Operations and Communications [at ISAF HQ] is understated: the strength of the operational ISAF Joint HQ effort was because it distributed Public Affairs Officers throughout the command to support all planning and operations, taking technical direction from the senior PAO.”¹⁷⁹

Within the HQ then, StratCom as a concept still was feeling its way around. “The truth is, while there were positive steps forward in establishing StratCom strategy and plans, there were still many who didn’t, couldn’t or wouldn’t see the importance of it within the military operation,” recalled a one-star from that time. In addition, there were still processes and procedures to follow, a general describing how more than one initiative became “stuck in the low-wire entanglements of bureaucracy. For instance, the opportunity arose to provide the Minister of the Interior and Minister of Defence with products for public safety messages to explain why to keep away from convoys, stay away from windows and doors on night raids, and we wanted to send them to the Afghans so that they owned them. The ISAF bureaucracy was very concerned about who would pay, and it didn’t happen. If the HQ wanted to strangle a good idea in a blind alley, it could do that.”

Summary. The breadth, scale, and scope of activity at this time was enormous. The structure by now was big, unwieldy, and fragmented in many different parts, all clamouring to be featured and to factor into the many communication activities. By this point, the burden of structure, the all-too-frequent change of personalities within the Command Group, and the variable experiences and skills of staff engaged in the function all combined to challenge maximising benefit and effect from the many assigned resources.

Practitioners recall that the COMISAF was very attuned to profile and credibility with a real focus on media and legislative affairs, drawing considerable attention particularly from senior staff, to support. Media events dominated the space. The operational tempo was building, the sense being that the back of the insurgency needed to be broken quickly in order to set the conditions for an orderly draw-down and transition to Afghan forces in 2014 as desired. The SAV comments and all interviewed for this chapter of the report speak to the challenge of fitting together the StratCom pieces and having “everybody play nicely.” It is at this point that joined-up StratCom policy, doctrine and training start to show as a real operational need.¹⁸⁰

More than any of the other commands examined, this tour highlights two fundamental concerns and questions around organisational design that continue today including: whether the campaign and all actors are better served with an experienced operator at the head of StratCom, or with a professional communicator;¹⁸¹ and that the division of responsibilities in the StratCom disciplines between strategic and operational-level HQs, particularly those in very close proximity, is not always neatly defined. With the announcement of the force draw-down and transition to Afghan forces, the StratCom effort now shifted gears.

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 180 This chapter may read like it is more critical than other commands. It is not meant to be, and rather, is the consequence of this command requesting a review of its operations: none of those 100 interviewed for this report mentioned any other command that undertook this initiative. And, as the assessment makes clear, “the entire staff understand the importance of communications and effective/timely application of Information Operations, Public Affairs, PSYOPS, as well as other related outreach programs are key to ISAF successfully executing the ISAF strategy.”

181 Civilian practise is insightful here. It is almost unheard of for major companies to put an engineering, finance or operational head in as their chief of communications: instead, they are grown from within or are carefully recruited.

CHAPTER 4.16

THE FORCE DRAWS DOWN

“The great challenge to Afghanistan’s future isn’t the Taliban, or the Pakistani safe havens or even an incipiently hostile Pakistan. The existential threat to the long-term viability of modern Afghanistan is corruption.”

Gen. Allen at Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee, Spring 2014¹⁸²

General John Allen, U.S.	General Joseph Dunford, U.S.	General John Campbell, U.S.
July 2011 - February 2013	February 2013 - August 2014	August 2014 - December 2014 ¹⁷²

The announcement in June 2011 of a conditions-based yet substantive timeline for the draw-down of U.S., and thence NATO forces, fundamentally changed the dynamic of the mission and put pressure on ISAF to re-double its efforts to train Afghan National Security Forces and enable their institutional capacity to adequately support fielded forces. The last three COMISAFs faced similar strategic imperatives, if different challenges each tour. The communications structures at ISAF and the ISAF Joint Command over the course of the 2011-2014 were by now well established and by all accounts appear to have essentially remained the same although capabilities were reduced over time (such as analysts for assessment) or eliminated (forward media teams) as the overall force levels drew down which it was doing in earnest by December 2013.

This chapter captures highlights from exchanges with almost a dozen senior staff who served in various StratCom functions during 2011-2014. Most of these tours straddled more than one commander – the broad commonality of issues and activities meant there was less to distinguish one command’s ‘lessons’ from those of another. Key findings are grouped, providing insight into a general culture rather than simply the personality of one command or commander. The most pertinent of the many comments and observations about the communication campaign from this time period were:

- the Commander is still too key to successful StratCom – StratCom and as a mindset is not engrained in the staff.

182 See <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/may/14/afghanistan-corruption-still-severe-problem-us-wat/?page=all>

183 General Campbell is also the first Commander, Resolute Support

- the ongoing challenge of messaging and the requirement for instinct born of experience when faced with events that hammer at organisational credibility.
- generally sufficient resources at this stage of the campaign but of variable quality.
- any exit strategy needs to include robust and early capacity building of indigenous forces.

6 August 2011: Taliban down Chinook helicopter killing 38 including 17 Navy SEALs.

October 2011: The UN reports that opium production rose 61 per cent over the year previous.

December 2011: President Karzai says NATO-led night raids and home searches are “one of the main obstacles” to signing an Afghan-U.S. strategic partnership.

20 January 2012: Video shows U.S. Marines urinating on corpses believed to be insurgents.

21 February 2012: COMISAF orders inquiry into allegations that Korans were mistakenly burned at an air base. Violent protests erupt and several are killed in rioting over several days.

11 March 2012: U.S. Staff Sergeant Robert Bales leaves base and kills 17 Afghans in their homes.

20-21 May 2012: Chicago Summit. NATO endorses ‘exit strategy.’

14 September 2012: Insurgent raid on Camp Bastien kills two Marines, destroys six Harrier jets, seriously damages two others, and wreaks other damage. 14 insurgents are killed.¹⁸⁴

10 March 2013: President Karzai alleges U.S. is collaborating with Taliban to ensure forces stay after 2014.

25 March 2013: U.S. hands over prison facility at Bagram air base to the Afghan government.

8 April 2013: Pres Karzai denounces and orders an enquiry into Kunar airstrike that kills several children.

18 June 2013: Afghanistan officially assumes security lead across the country.

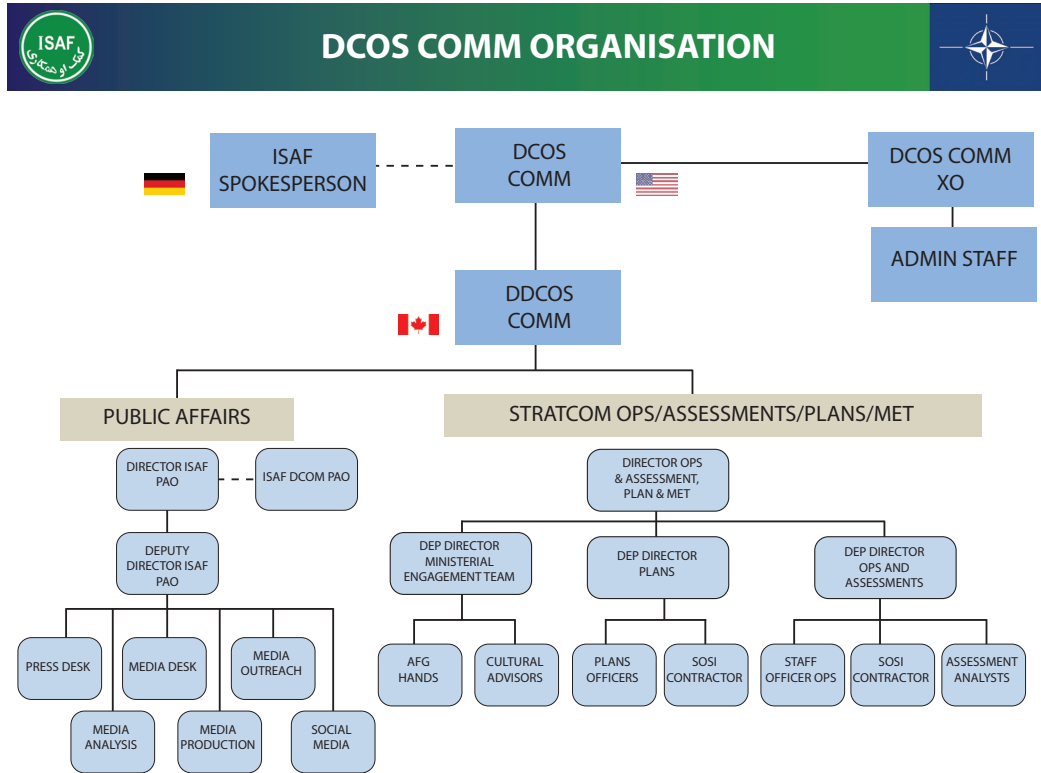
31 Dec 2014: ISAF mission concludes. Afghanistan assumes responsibility for security across the country.

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184 See <http://www.rs.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/isaf-provides-additional-details-on-camp-bastion-attack.htm>

ISAF TOP ISSUES (EXTERNAL)	ISAF TOP ISSUES (INTERNAL)	DOMINANT MEDIA THEMES																					
<p>'Green on blue' attacks.¹⁸⁵ Troop contributing nation support erodes</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Year</th> <th>#Killed</th> <th>#Attacks Causing Death</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2003-09</td> <td>12</td> <td>N/A</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2010</td> <td>20</td> <td>11</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2011</td> <td>35</td> <td>21</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2012*</td> <td>57</td> <td>41</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2013</td> <td>14</td> <td>9</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2014</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Year	#Killed	#Attacks Causing Death	2003-09	12	N/A	2010	20	11	2011	35	21	2012*	57	41	2013	14	9	2014	4	3	<p>Internal information: training coalition troops to defend against insider attacks.</p>	<p>Attacks on NATO soldiers by Afghan allies</p>
Year	#Killed	#Attacks Causing Death																					
2003-09	12	N/A																					
2010	20	11																					
2011	35	21																					
2012*	57	41																					
2013	14	9																					
2014	4	3																					
<p>Civilian casualties caused by NATO</p>	<p>Increasing coordination with Afghan authorities and identifying how to influence Afghan leadership on key issues affecting transfer of responsibility</p>	<p>Series of major 'one-off' events ('meteor strikes' in words of General Allen): urination video, Bales' murders, President Karzai public statements, etc.</p>																					
<p>Helping to create trust in Afghan partners and AFG partners through promotion of legitimate successes</p>	<p>Organising effort to effect training and mentoring of Afghan ministries</p>	<p>Security situation in Kabul and elsewhere that 'demonstrated' Afghan forces do not look ready</p>																					
<p>Readiness of AFG army and police to assume main responsibility for ops.</p>	<p>Work through 'mid-level leadership' (up to two-star), to retain capability throughout and beyond drawdown period</p>	<p>Civilian casualties caused by NATO/U.S.-led forces</p>																					
<p>Trying to provide overall perspective of the security situation in areas that were stable or improving</p>	<p>Managing unrealistic command expectations of what StratCom on its own can deliver</p>	<p>Chicago Summit (2012)</p>																					
<p>Impact of President Karzai's pronouncements about NATO/ISAF</p>																							
<p>Managing/explaining the drawdown of forces and defining the legacy narrative</p>																							
<p>Afghan Presidential elections</p>																							
<p>Continue StratCom as a Line of Effort In Resolute Support</p>																							

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185 'Green on blue' refers to attacks by Afghan Security Forces against Allied Troops. Attacks from 2007-March 2012 killed 52 American soldiers and wounded 48 more. *An article from the U.S. Army notes that 62 "personnel" were killed. Brookings left off civilian contractors in the past which may account for the difference. As of February 9, 2015. See <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Programs/foreign-policy/afghanistan-index/index20150210.pdf?la=en>

Figure 11: ISAF HQ Deputy Chief Of Staff Communication Structure, February 2014



COURTESY BRIGADIER-GENERAL TODD BALFE, DEPUTY DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF COMMUNICATION 2013-2014.

The staff complement was “more than 70.” At the ISAF Joint Command HQ for the better part of the 2011-2013 period the organisation continued to consist of Public Affairs (about 20), Info Ops and Engagements (7-9 each), and a significantly sized CJPOTF, though that was slimming down.

Over-reliance, still, on the personality and engagement of the Commander. Feedback from interviewees suggests that it is too early just yet to claim that the ISAF experience shows StratCom to be welcomed as an unqualified success within deployed strategic HQs. There was general agreement that regardless of rank or background, the DCOSCOMM had little means “to generate StratCom cohesion absent COMISAF’s continued insistence on it – without this 4-star oversight, StratCom was destined to fail,” said one of the Deputy DCOSCOMMs. Though the StratCom group did not ‘own’ Info Ops including Military Deception and Key Leader Engagement, an integrated targeting cycle meant these elements could be pulled together but it “only worked because the Commander demanded this coherence.

In the absence of that the stove-piping at ISAF HQ would have significantly degraded StratCom efforts.” This situation is exacerbated by the relative under-ranking of the communications head compared to other DCOS’. Brigadier-General Todd Balfe, one of the DDCOSCOMMs, made clear that “without a Commander who understands and accepts StratCom, no structure will succeed. A grouping of all these elements under a StratCom framework, yes, but that is not a panacea – StratCom is everyone’s business and must be command-directed.”

Messaging. There were three threads of messaging that consistently ran through each of the last three COMISAF command periods. Individually and collectively they are good examples of there being no right, or easy answer at times, and of the need to bring experienced advice to bear on problems that can seriously undermine organisational credibility. First and most pressing, and one that defied easy answer, were the ‘green on blue’ attacks. At 17 months, General Allen served the longest tour as COMISAF and during that time “saw it all” taking over at the peak of ISAF strength, and at tour end still with 100,000 under command. His command period bore the brunt of these attacks – from a communications perspective there being “no good lines” to try to keep up support from troop contributing nations. “Initially we were not messaging well because we could not answer the tidal wave of donor government and media questions since we did not have a good understanding of why and how the attacks were occurring,” recalled one senior Public Affairs Officer. “There was no particular process to deal with this other than some behind-closed-doors discussions with General Allen on what we should say and when. Eventually we went on the media offensive with him doing 60 Minutes [a major U.S. television news program] and some other high-profile interviews, but we should have gone out earlier.”

Second was the standard challenge of keeping to a narrative script when military actions could not be explained away, particularly when associated with the death or injury of innocent Afghans through air strikes or Special Forces raids. More than one practitioner noted that consecutive COMISAFs repeatedly stated that at this stage of the mission it was all about the information campaign, “yet kinetic activities that were not critically important were permitted to continue, and very often harmed the NATO information narrative.”

Third, defining the legacy narrative was a very real challenge. “It was difficult to convince the Afghan public that their institutions were ready when every day there were examples that they weren’t,” recalled a senior Public Affairs Officer. “There was a lot of tacit pressure to wrap up and summarise the mission as a success, allowing ISAF to draw down as quickly as it wanted.” Nations were also interested in obtaining whatever credit they could from the campaign, and

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Without a Commander who understands and accepts StratCom, no structure will succeed. A grouping of all these elements under a StratCom framework, yes, but that is not a panacea – StratCom is everyone’s business and must be command-directed.

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when “they should have been handing over responsibility – and credit – to the Afghans, nations couldn’t help but put out messages of ownership and achievement to national home audiences whenever there was ‘good news’ to promote. As a result, Afghans never really got a chance to ‘take ownership’ of the narrative prior to withdrawal or take any credit for good news, making it look like the Afghan government came across as ineffectual puppets.”

Closely associated with the importance of support from the Commander and the challenges of messaging and responding to events is the dilemma frequently raised about whether an Operator or a Communicator should be in charge of StratCom as an integrating function. As Colonel Tom Collins, Chief Public Affairs Officer explains, “The fact that neither the DCOS or DDCOS had Info Ops or communication experience before this tour was neither hard nor easy, just a fact of life in a multi-national environment. As Chief PAO, I had great access to General Allen and then General Dunford and to the Operations Division, so I had what I needed to do my job effectively.” Views from those interviewed for this report on whether an operator or a communicator should be the StratCom lead essentially came down to whether the interviewee was an operator or a communicator, each group recommending one of their own. It is hard to argue that the breadth of experience of a proven and hand-picked one-star does not add credibility to the StratCom function within a strategic-level HQ. Operators are generally viewed as having instant ‘street credibility’ with others on staff including among the Command Group, to being more practised at leveraging the battle rhythm matrix and bringing a “deliberate planning approach” to the StratCom activity set. Still, many practitioners are wary of a succession of overseers without a practised hand and eye at instinctively knowing the right way to address a major issue affecting organisational credibility – a circumstance that occurs regularly on operations.



The Change of Mission ceremony from ISAF to RESOLUTE SUPPORT in Kabul, 2014.

Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

People resources. By this point in the campaign the number and type of communication resources were much less of an issue than the variable training of the staff, with one DDCOSCOMM remarking that, “we struggled to develop and write coherent products with a very shallow pool of talent, even though there were over 70 people in the organisation.” In an ironic twist, the officer added, “we did, fortunately, have a handful (4-6) of Afghan hands, some of who were also PAO’s, who did superb work.”

Of particular note was the significant effort required to retain a functioning CJPOTF capability which by early 2013 was on the cusp of being reduced to as few as 20 (from a high of about 180) in order to meet the NATO and U.S. mandated reductions. The ability to reach out and communicate to indigenous populations during a time of major transition such as ISAF to Resolute Support and Afghan-in-the -lead messaging seems like it should be obvious, but it was not, and needed the personal intervention of COMISAF Dunford to limit the prospective damage of taking away the critical mass needed to continue to have effect. As a general officer in the thick of that work put it, “this was the most egregious example of a command failure to understand the importance of StratCom with a conscious decision to eliminate CJPOTF in order to preserve kinetic force elements during the drawdown.”

Afghan capacity begins to show strength. At the same time, the transition strategy of capacity building was very much applicable to the communication domain as well. For instance, the ISAF HQ Public Affairs office stopped putting out a daily summary of operations that had taken place, a product that was both useful and well-liked by media. Initially this was resisted, with frequent media complaints that the Afghans were not responsive, and media doubted the veracity of information when they did receive some. The ISAF offices remained firm though, but also mentored the Afghan public affairs staff so that they could become more responsive and develop into a very professional PA section – and by now, years of operations meant that “the Afghans had some very savvy professionals working in their section,” said a former Chief Public Affairs Officer. Media queries were also more readily referred to Afghans though coordination with the Spokesperson’s office continued to ensure that ISAF messaging remained in synch with theirs. It was a shift from do, to encourage and mentor.

SUMMARY

The requirement was to create a coherent and consistent narrative, to pull together the many disparate strands of the communication function, to take action using a targeting cycle, and to build indigenous capability mainly in the Afghan Ministry of Defence. “These were all very positive steps in the right direction,” recalls a DDCOSCOMM, “but they came too late in the campaign.” For the record, this is how the Secretary General summarised the campaign marking the end of ISAF, but as well, the start of Resolute Support:

*“This mandate was carried out at great cost, but with great success. We will always remember the sacrifice of international and Afghan forces, who deserve our respect and our gratitude. Thanks to the remarkable effort of our forces, we have achieved what we set out to do. We have made our own nations safer, by denying safe haven to international terrorists. We have made Afghanistan stronger, by building up from scratch 350,000 strong security forces. And together, we have created the conditions for a better future for millions of Afghan men, women and children. So despite all the challenges, Afghans now live longer, have more opportunities to work, and have a better chance of a better future than at any time in their history. And there is a clear government commitment to continue vital reforms, including in the areas of good governance, accountability, and human rights, including rights for women.”*¹⁸⁵

CHAPTER 4.17

THE COMBINED JOINT PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS TASK FORCE (CJPOTF)

“If CJPOTF was a civilian company it would be bust within a week. Product development for TV takes months whereas in the real world to shoot a 30-second commercial spot would probably take a few days from pre-production to on-air. The approvals process was by committee and there was no overall creative direction – why should we expect a military commander to run a media organisation and know the difference between a good and bad TV spot or how to run a popular radio station? Would we expect someone from Madison Avenue to plan and execute a brigade-level operation? No. I often heard the TV section say ‘yeah, but this is only Afghanistan, the quality is much lower,’ as if the universal rules on what constitutes good television didn’t apply here.”¹⁸⁶

Overview

On balance, NATO succeeded in realising the political Centre of Gravity it set for itself, that being “maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance” albeit with a significant reliance on U.S. assets to achieve that. A less rosy outcome is the other half of the campaign – the extent to which the ‘influence’ effort was effective in convincing Afghans to support ISAF and the international community, and to reduce the influence of malign actors.

Influence, or the capacity to have an effect on the character, development or behaviour of someone or something,¹⁸⁷ was a function and interplay of literally everything that was or was not done during the mission. This includes the manner and way that forces conducted themselves during operations, how military-related reconstruction and development money was apportioned and contracts awarded, and the thousands of everyday face-to-face interactions with local populations across the country. By mid-2009, six years into the NATO-led ISAF campaign, it was COMISAF General McChrystal’s firm view on taking command that, “We must do things dramatically differently – even uncomfortably differently – to change how we operate, and also how we think. Our every action must reflect this change of mindset.”¹⁸⁸

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186 Long-standing member of CJPOTF.

187 Oxford English Dictionary.

188 COMISAF’s *Initial Assessment*, 30 August 2009, p. 1-3.

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It is an odd and curious situation, then, that in a mission so intent on connecting with the indigenous population, and with doctrine that so clearly and explicitly puts the information campaign at the heart of the effort particularly in a counterinsurgency campaign, that the function of PSYOPS is so unstudied and under-appreciated.

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The StratCom disciplines are all meant to play a key role in communicating actions and intent to respective audiences with a view to helping achieve political and military objectives. Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs have a broad ‘inform and educate’ remit for all audiences but in light of the Alliance Centre of Gravity are highly attuned to the needs and information demands of troop contributing nations’ national audiences. Info Ops (focused on adversary

decision-makers and decision-making) and PSYOPS (focused directly on indigenous audiences), have broadly similar remits that relate to reinforcing or affecting changes in behaviour in a manner and way that best realises specific objectives. PSYOPS aims to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviours and thereby “gain the support and cooperation of supportive and neutral audiences and to reduce the will and the capacity of hostile or potentially hostile audiences.”¹⁸⁹

The influence campaign is of course, huge. In large measure *it is what the whole mission was about*. It is an odd and curious situation, then, that in a mission so intent on connecting with the indigenous population, and with doctrine that so clearly and explicitly puts the information campaign at the heart of the effort particularly in a counterinsurgency campaign,¹⁹⁰ that the function of PSYOPS is so unstudied and under-appreciated. A considerable budget, people and resources were employed throughout the mission to transport assets by air and land throughout the country produce and distribute material

189 Allied Joint Publication 3-10.1 (Edition B) *Allied Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations*, September 2014.

190 Nagl (2014, p. 88): "An important part of any counterinsurgency fight - arguably the most important - is conducting information operations in support of the friendly government and against the insurgents, directed at audiences both in country and at home."

McChrystal (2009, p. D-2): "This is now a population centric campaign and no effort should be spared to ensure that the Afghan people are part of the conversation."

Kilcullen (2009, p. 60): "In essence, effective counterinsurgency is a matter of good governance, backed by solid population security and economic development measures, resting on a firm foundation of energetic [Info Ops], which unifies and drives all other activity."

such as newspapers and leaflets; and help establish, maintain and secure radio transmission towers. Its work had broad, deep implications for NATO operations but it receives considerably shorter shrift than it deserves. It is little discussed if ever in the Military Committee as a whole, less so in the North Atlantic Council, and features little in military biography.¹⁹¹

If any subject in ISAF warrants a deep dive it is the influence campaign in theatre and the PSYOPS component in particular. There are so many elements to this effort that this report does not purport to do it justice (though Chapter 7 does look to offer a meaningful view on the quality of the main products of the campaign). Rather, this chapter is a brief overview of the effort and what it set out to accomplish, provides an overview of the structure and resourcing, and discusses observations of particular note drawing from practitioner feedback and relevant literature, including:

- the importance of the ‘understand’ function and how that impacts strategy and thence messaging;
- the lack of continuity of vision and unity of effort;
- concerns about the quality of the product;
- a need for greater awareness, oversight and audit of the function;
- the problems of firewalls between disciplines, and the lack of guidance in policy and doctrine about the role, place and importance of capacity building.

These findings and suggested corrective action are reflected in the recommendations found at Chapter 2.

Discussion

After all is said and done perhaps it is most fair to conclude that the PSYOPS campaign was impactful and positively so, but by how much, is not reasonably quantifiable. No-one seems to rightly know, and there is the risk both in attributing too much benefit to it, and conversely the risk of attributing too much of the blame for negative outcomes. For instance, PSYOPS and Info Ops efforts were important catalysts for the establishment of a communication voice and choice in a media environment initially bereft of much to choose

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 191 In three years of attending Military Committee and North Atlantic Council meetings between 2005 and 2008, this author cannot recall a single time the subject was discussed. Other report participants who served subsequently expressed a similar view. NATO's Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre does not have any study on the influence/PSYOPS campaign on their public website. And, PSYOPS, influence campaign, Info Ops and StratCom don't even merit making an appearance in the index of military biography of the time, including Dannatt (2010), Richards (2014), and McChrystal (2014).

from in Afghanistan. Their work helped set the conditions for the explosive growth of a competitive Afghan media scene. It was also assessed to have been a key element to the successes of the Presidential and provincial elections, working closely with the government and the security services to help get out the vote. It is a capability that takes considerable effort and energy to plan and execute – and is needed at tactical, operational and strategic levels. More effect needs to be expended in careful reflection about where it fits into the scheme of the overall campaign effect, including what it is doing, how it is doing it, and how its tremendous potential can be better leveraged to greater operational effect.

Asking the question, “What do we do differently now than in 2003?” across each of the communications disciplines would present quite different answers and in the case of NATO PSYOPS, the answer seems likely to be “not very much”. Going forward, ideally the Afghanistan experience would inform a different answer to the question, “What will we do differently next time?”. This situation is expressed in a number of ways, including the lack of influence-based campaign objectives; minimalist staff at NATO strategic HQs that oversee the function (generally, one staff officer at SHAPE HQ, one staff officer at the International Military Staff and one at Allied Command Transformation); and the admission by a senior NATO HQ executive that “we have absolutely no insight into what Info Ops and PSYOPS do.”¹⁹²

Getting a handle on how impactful PSYOPS was is a key focus of discussion, debate and exchange of all practitioners who participated in this report.¹⁹³ Measuring effect, quite distinct from measuring performance, is exceedingly more challenging and subject to many complications, as this researcher who conducted a major study into the U.S. effort explains:

“It is an inexact undertaking. Tracking the evolution of specific campaigns in Afghanistan is difficult because there is no central repository of data, neither in the United States nor in Afghanistan, concerning themes and messages disseminated or specific operations and their impact on target audiences. Moreover, IO and PSYOP in Afghanistan have been characterised by a high degree of variation between the different components operating in theatre, including special-forces teams in the field, regional commands (RCs), task forces, and the ISAF headquarters in Kabul. What might be an accurate observation for RC East might not apply to RC South. No one has compiled a comprehensive record of all these decentralised PSYOP campaigns.

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192 Interview, 2015.

193 This section relied on the frank feedback from 9 former and serving ISAF staff very familiar with CJPTF's operations, some of whom preferred not to be identified in the acknowledgements.

In an effort to protect local collaborators from reprisals and minimise the [U.S. military] public "footprint," PSYOP activities increasingly are classified, which further impedes accurate comparisons of past and present practices."¹⁹⁴

Retired UK Royal Navy Commander Dr. Steve Tatham commanded UK PSYOPS in theatre, and is of the view that measuring effect is not as difficult as is widely suggested, "if you have robust benchmarking of behaviours through Target Audience Analysis (TAA)¹⁹⁵ before the influence intervention. The problem was that there were little robust TAA, and that the interventions took so long that even if there had been Measures of Effectiveness baselining it was long forgotten because the wheel was re-invented every six months with new people."¹⁹⁶

Measures of Performance (such as the amount of radio airtime, listenership and papers printed and delivered on time) even when accurately determined, do not link those, or other ISAF-generated influence activities to attitudinal or behavioural change. Support for NATO and dislike of the Taliban are of course driven by a whole host of factors and there is a propensity to seriously over-estimate the ability of NATO- owned media to influence compared to other daily-life practices like how military convoys drive on roads or the hiring practises for locals. It should be recalled that the anti-smoking and anti-driving while inebriated campaigns in the West have been influence campaigns of a generation's duration, and there are many reasons for the decline in these behaviours aside from a robust public information campaign including laws, sanction, costs, and general societal disdain.

Still, the figures for Afghan support of the international mission and of ISAF are decidedly in its favour (see Table 15). All of this report's respondents noted an over-reliance on polling as a decision-tool in ISAF. Done right, polls are discrete measures that can show trends in attitude but there is usually little or no context as to why those views changed and no substantive means of linking CJPOTF activities to desired outcomes. The fact that approval ratings

194 Arturo Munoz. *U.S. Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001-2010*, Rand Corporation, May 2012.

195 The UK defines TAA as "the systematic study of people to enhance understanding and identify accessibility, vulnerability, and susceptibility to behavioural and attitudinal influence," and sets out three categories to help understand how much reliability can be placed on the information when developing a strategy. Tier 1 TAA is the most detailed, being a "multi-source, scientifically verified, diagnostic methodology undertaken in-country and in the host language," and tested against a scientifically derived hypothesis: an example is a six-month contracted in-country project involving deployed field research teams. Tier 2 is any primary research involving information recorded from interactions with target audiences (such as, a "soldier asking a local baker what he thinks might influence his neighbours to behave in a specific way"). Tier 3 TAA is secondary research (including Internet-based research). See UK Ministry of Defence, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations* 3.10.1 with UK National Elements, 24 June 2015, p. 1.4.

196 Personal exchange.

for national security forces go up for instance, could be because the suite of information products has been particularly effective, but it is surely much more likely a reflection of the recent personal experiences of the interviewee. “The effort to identify a correlation (let alone causation) between what we spend, produce and broadcast with any resultant attitudinal or behavioural change is simply not resourced. We assess if there has been a change through quarterly analysis but the methodology to link it to what we do is risible.”¹⁹⁷ In short, there is a lot of anecdotal, but less *concrete* evidence of the effectiveness of CJPOTF.

ISAF’s Radio Bayan is a case in point. Commanders know radio is important in Afghanistan. What they are told is that the station reaches 80% of the Afghan population but less well known is that the station has about a 4% audience share nation-wide. Even less well understood is how listeners interact with the broadcast ... “do they listen to the spots or make tea when they come on,” asks a CJPOTF staffer, “and if they listen to the spots do they rush out and cuddle a policeman?”

“The ISAF command relied on surveys that were relatively crude but were the best tools available,” recalled a senior officer who served at ISAF in the 2013-14 period. “Unfortunately, the command accepted them at face value and selectively read them to support their arguments. One of the guiding questions of the Quarterly Strategic Assessment Reports reflected public opinion and support for NATO and Afghan security forces and garnered extensive command attention – if the conflict was for the hearts and minds of Afghans, we needed a metric to see if we were in fact succeeding. Unfortunately, little science was applied to this as the Deputy Chief of Staff Communication analysis section was reduced from five to two people and their great work was regularly “*adjusted*” by [a one-star general] to reflect success when in fact, statistically, there was no measurable change. Thus, without real science and real Human Terrain Analysis, HQ leaders were able to honestly (or otherwise) interpret and present the data to suit their personal agendas and ambitions.”

One innovative program CJPOTF leveraged to obtain ground-truth about population sentiments on a host of ISAF-directed topics and to assess product effectiveness with key audiences was the Atmospherics Program Afghanistan (AP-A). This was a contracted effort of roughly 600 Afghan civilians throughout each Regional Command’s area of responsibility, who provided weekly reports including generic but useful Word-on-the-Street reports providing insight into what people found to be of interest relating to ISAF or the Afghan government.

Data generated from each report was compiled and presented to CJPOTF leadership and staff during internal product development meetings and in some cases to senior ISAF Joint Command and ISAF leadership. In mid- to late-2014 the program's effectiveness was questioned by ISAF leadership and subsequently, eliminated completely.

Obtaining that social science-based evidence has proven elusive. It is the prerogative of commanders to decide courses of action based on the weight of evidence and instinct derived from training, but this should be based on a better understanding of the analysis at hand, or to commit to doing the science in the first place. The great problem is one of time: time to establish the research program parameters, to obtain, review and develop findings, and then to develop the products based on the research. While eminently reasonable, this sequence does not square well with the schedule of commanders and staff in place for three months, six months or a year, when the issues and problem sets they are dealing with is 'right now.' The real challenge is that kinetic targeting cycles can be measured in hours and is a process all staff have trained for years to understand and to conduct. Counter-corruption and counter-narcotics programs on the other hand, are difficult, generation(s)-long, whole of government efforts. Battle damage assessment is tangible and immediate in comparison, and the prospective pace of behavioural change does not square nicely with the short-term needs of an operational staff. The irony is that NATO/ISAF had the strategic patience to last well more than a decade in the campaign, but did not have the time to invest a few months in establishing a quality research enterprise, thereby resigning each successive commander to be less successful than they would otherwise have been.

Germany ran CJPOTF from ISAF start until April 2011 when the U.S. took over for about a year, all the while continuing their own major effort under Military Information Support Task Force Afghanistan (MISTF-A). Romania took CJPOTF command as of June 2012 until ISAF end. Many nations provided assets for their own regional or brigade/national contingents, and while the U.S. and Germany have the most capability, Italy and Romania provided effective forces as well, noting France, Poland and the United Kingdom having small but capable units. That is not to suggest though, that all nations are equally creative in the field, or are equally deep in capability at all ranks.

In the early days of ISAF the PSYOPS campaign was Kabul-centric and modest by nature, as was the ISAF mission. The Afghan media landscape had been all but destroyed. Then, Germany was still coming to terms with what they could and could not do on modern expeditionary operations, focusing their efforts on loudspeakers, print and leaflets, all of which were low-risk. The ARRC (2006-

07) under General Richards is considered by some practitioners as the first to have moved beyond small-scale tactically focused PSYOPS campaigning by “explaining to the Afghan people what the game-plan was, and by encouraging an Afghan perspective, helped by the fact that Internet was in its infancy as was Afghan coverage in those pre-wifi days and at a time when ISAF had a preponderance of traditional media,” recalled Abigail Austen, who spent 1,000 days in theatre with CJPOTF and has written about her experiences in a raw and powerful memoir of that time.¹⁹⁸

“Later, General McChrystal’s special forces background was instrumental at considering the importance of target audience analysis, and tying in all the human terrain mapping being done. Subsequently, commanders like General Allen had the benefit of the ground-breaking that McChrystal did, the programs being relatively mature by that stage. Plus, General Allen insisted on cultural training, and on ISAF driving standards,” Austen said. Still, by 2013 there was a major effort to reduce staff as the overall ISAF force drawdown took effect, this at the time ISAF was working to reinforce to Afghans that they were not being abandoned, and to understand the new role that NATO was about to play in the mission.

“In the beginning, all the good stuff on tribal mapping, focus groups and individual engagement was a game changer,” said Austen. “But it was too much too quickly for the conventional side to absorb. The Americans were completely different, mostly in the amount of money they brought, which was off the scale. Local commanders had a ton of ready-spend. Trouble was, they didn’t pause to spend it, and didn’t stay long enough to audit the spend, so corrupt locals ran rings around them which then alienated all the decent locals, who saw the bad guys become our friends and get even richer. Still, their teams had the highest mix of civilian experts, and a high Civ Affairs emphasis, including leadership, which was good,” said Austen.

ORGANISATION

The key audiences targeted by PSYOPS included:

- local population of all ethnic groups (friendly/neutral).
- Afghan opinion leaders and key communicators (intermediate).
- leaders, members and supporters of armed Afghan groups and warring factions (hostile).

- groups and people operating in the Areas of Operation against ISAF, the Afghan government and its forces and agencies, and recognised international organisations.

The PSYOPS objectives were:¹⁹⁹

1. Maintain and expand ISAF and NATO as trustworthy sources of information.
2. Create and maintain (overall) a positive attitude towards ISAF and reinforce acceptance and the will to support ISAF and their operations in order to achieve stability for Afghanistan.
3. Discourage interference, confrontation, hostile activities and armed resistance against ISAF.
4. Convince the Afghan people to cooperate peacefully with one another.
5. Convince the Afghan population to appreciate and actively support the establishment of legitimate, responsible political and administrative structures and the rule of law as the foundation of a moderate, internationally accepted Afghanistan.
6. Convince the Afghan population to support and actively participate in the social, cultural, economic and political reconstruction efforts of the internationally recognised Afghan authorities and the assisting representatives of the International Community.
7. Convince the Afghan population of the necessity and advantages of the counter-narcotics program.
8. Convince the Afghan population to cease supporting illegal, opposing and destabilising groups.
9. Convince the Afghan population to support and actively participate in the Presidential and provincial elections (2009, 2014).

.....
 199 SACEUR Operational Plan for the ISAF in Afghanistan, OPLAN 10302. There were several areas identified as themes to avoid including quotations of religious text; reference to religious or ethnic affiliations, ethnic or religious innuendo; offenses against or to denigrate cultural, social or religious values; criticism of supportive leaders, UN and international organisations; judgements about the role of women in Afghan society; any discord in the Alliance and/or ISAF; and, comments on national policy of ISAF troop contributing nations.

CJPOTF product and output was varied and substantial, and at theatre-level this included:

- Radio Bayan 24hrs/7days.²⁰⁰
- a bi-monthly *Sada-e Azadi* newspaper/newsmagazine with the largest circulation in Kabul distributing up to 440,000 copies to 150 distribution points with regional inserts.²⁰¹ Video productions for nation-wide broadcasting in Afghanistan.
- a billboard campaign (227 country-wide that changed every 6-8 weeks)
- a Web page
- relationship-building items (hand-cranked radios, backpacks, school supplies, soccer balls)

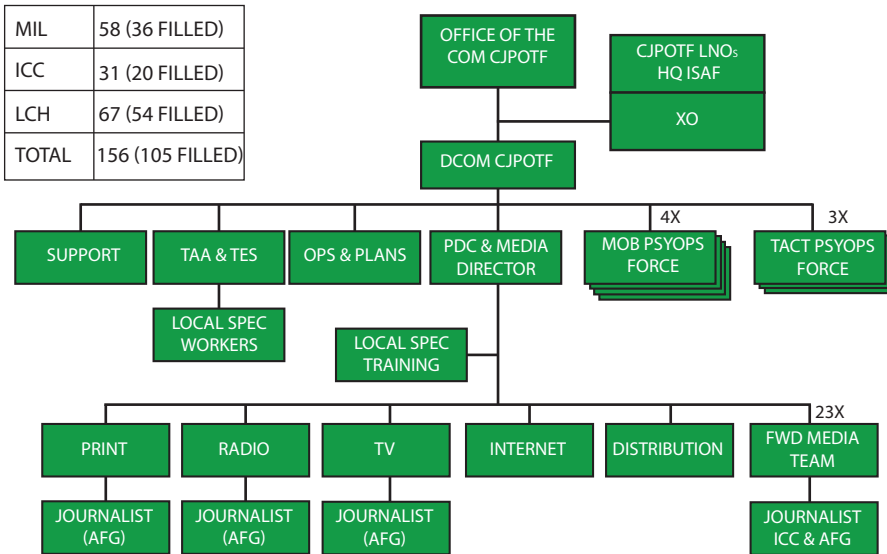
At regional levels the principal outputs were:

- to receive and transmit ISAF radio Sada-e Azadi 24hrs/7days
- radio products for local stations
- regional supplements for the *Sada-e Azadi* newspaper
- video productions for region-wide broadcast
- production of handbills, leaflets and posters

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 200 The name was changed from Radio Sada-e Azadi to Radio Bayan in early 2011, to differentiate it from another radio station with a similar name.

201 The format was changed from a newspaper to a magazine format in early 2011, as the newspapers were a popular wrapping for foodstuffs. "Whilst over 400,000 copies may be produced every fortnight, anecdotally less than 10 per cent actually reach the intended audience. In Kandahar, for example, the paper is printed under contract and collected by ICC [International Civilian Consultants] who then divide the paper up into numbers determined by CJPOTF staff. They are then transported to the various logistics areas on Kandahar airfield. The former ICC remembers the reaction the first time he went: 'their first reaction was to laugh and then tell you to f**k off. The pressure on air assets in Afghanistan is intense and the distribution of newspapers is as far down the priority list as it gets' ... If they were ever delivered, and according to the former ICC they rarely were, they would be two to three months out of date by the time they arrived." Mackay and Tatham (2011), p. 103. As of October 2015 the magazine is monthly, with 110,000 copies being distributed.

Figure 12: Structure CJPOTF (June 2006)



MIL = MILITARY; ICC = INTERNATIONAL CIVILIAN CONSULTANT; LCH = LOCAL HIRE

Figure 13: Structure CJPOTF (September 2007)

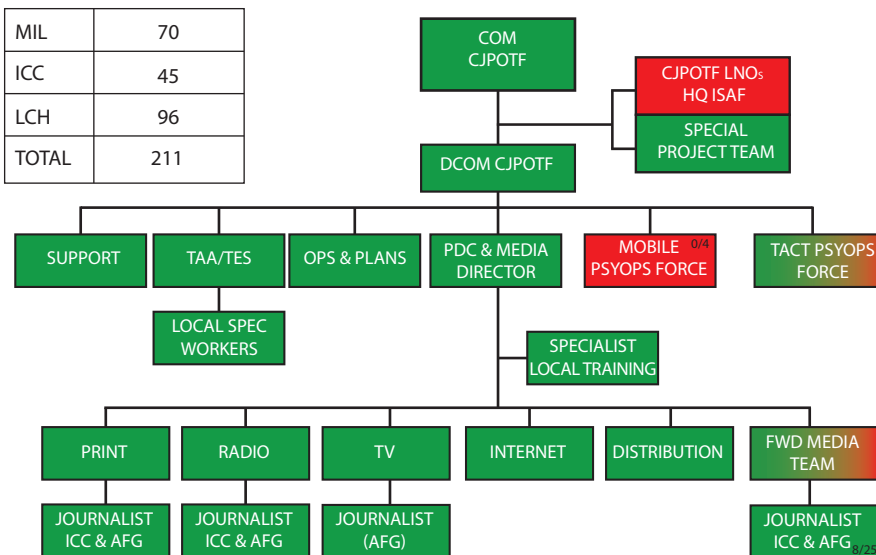


Figure 14: Structure CJPOTF (April 2011)

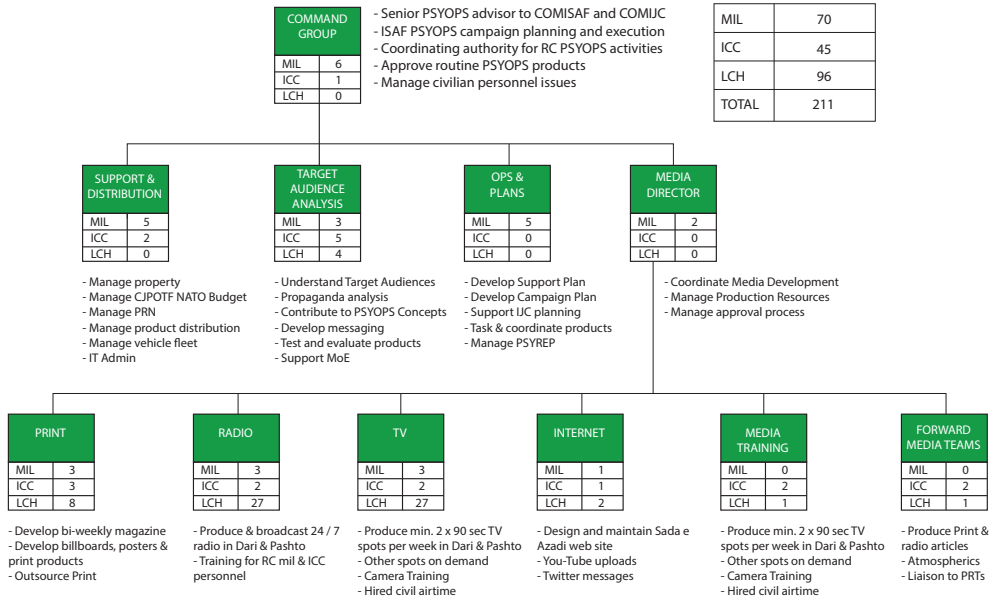


Figure 15: Structure CJPOTF (September 2012)

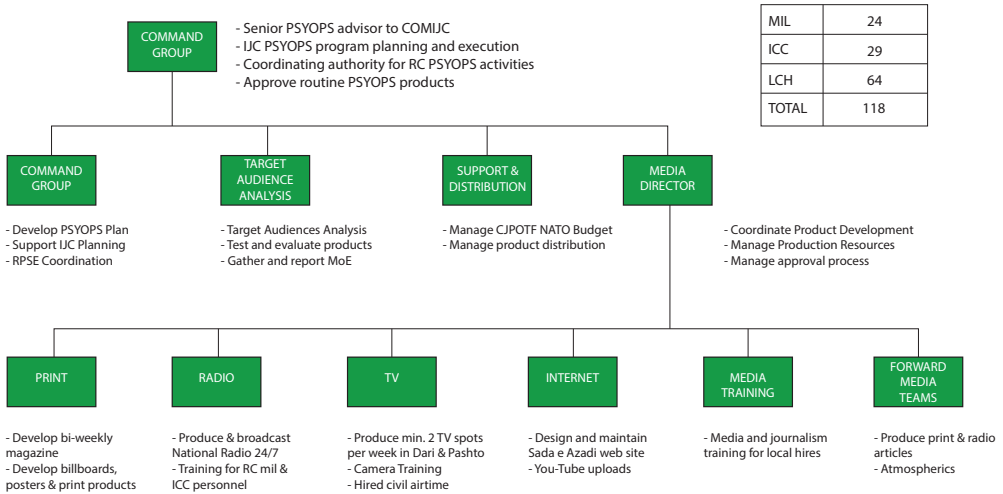
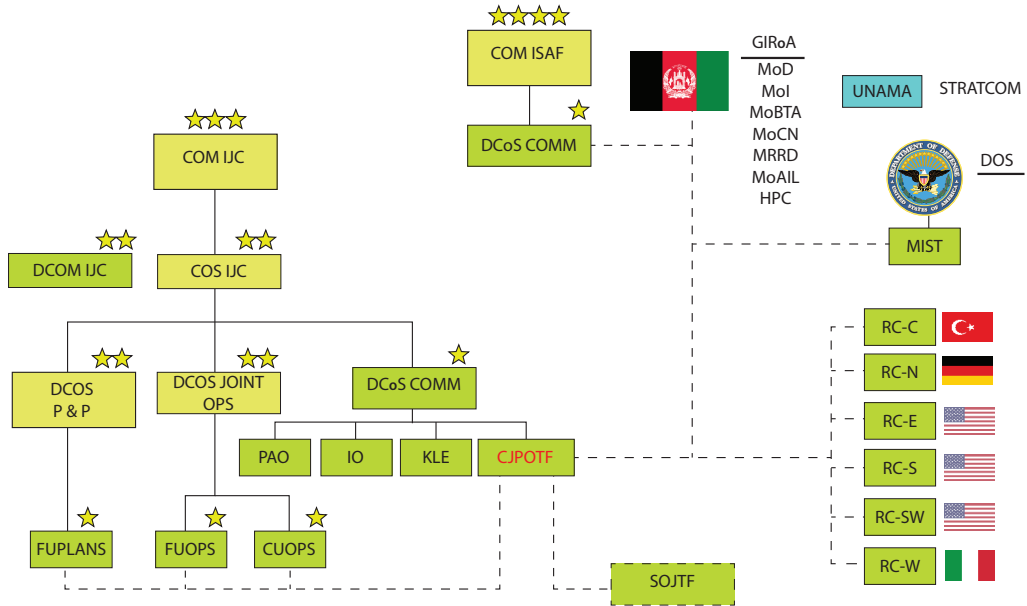


Figure 16: CJPOTF Coordination



Overarching Observations

There is not an over-abundance of literature about the ISAF Info Ops/PSYOPS campaign, particularly evaluations of its effectiveness. One of two well-known studies, completed by RAND on the American Info Ops/PSYOPS effort from 2001-2010 identified seven interrelated issues of note:

- a lack of standardised Info Ops and PSYOPS integration with operations.
- long response times and coordination-process delays.
- ineffective interface between Info Ops and PSYOPS.
- isolation of Info Ops officers.
- conflicting Info Ops, PSYOPS and Public Affairs functions.
- failure to exploit the informal, oral Afghan communication system.
- and a general lack of Measures of Effectiveness.²⁰²

A paper produced in response to the RAND study agreed that there was “value” in each of the conclusions, but noted substantively different issues:²⁰³

202 Munoz (2012), p. 119.

203 Andrew Mackay, Steve Tatham and Lee Rowland, *The Effectiveness of U.S. Military Operations in Afghanistan 2001-2010: Why RAND missed the point*. Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 12/02a, December 2012.

- failure to adapt and evolve.
- unhealthy over-reliance on attitudinal products.
- the absence of a narrative that Afghans can believe and trust.
- no effort to conduct coherent Target Audience Analysis (TAA).
- the absence of proper Measures of Effectiveness procedures and methodologies.
- over-reliance on surveys and polling.
- an education and training deficit at senior levels [of NATO militaries].
- complex command and control structures at every level of command and a concomitant dysfunctionality as a direct result.

This brief review of CJPOTF, based in large measure on exchanges with several staff working within or alongside the unit, found a greater alignment of findings with the Tatham/Mackay/Rowland rebuttal (which was focused on a need to ‘understand audiences better’) than the Munoz study (that was very much focused on issues of process). The six most notable issues in *this* report’s findings are listed and discussed below in order of importance: the four points highlighted were not explicitly featured in the conclusions of the two aforementioned studies:

- the ‘understand’ function did not sufficiently inform messaging and content.
- **lack of continuity of vision and unity of effort.**
- **concern over quality of the product.**
- **lack of oversight and the isolation of PSYOPS.**
- the firewall between Public Affairs and PSYOPS.
- **the role, place and balance of effort between doing, partnering, and facilitating.**

The ‘Understand’ Function Did Not Sufficiently Inform Messaging and Content. There was considerable effort in military HQs placed on task planning, significantly less on the ‘understand’ function. This is in large measure because of a drive and interest in addressing issues ‘now’. As Alexei Gavriel, anthropologist and former CJPOTF member with almost five years’ experience in Afghanistan explains, “there is a patterned tendency in a headquarters to see a media report or survey graph on a changing perception and begin to plan ‘what we are going to do about it’ rather than examining further to ‘understand’ what is going on, why, what we want to do about (if anything), and what we could do that would influence it.

The ‘understand’ function is over-looked, under-valued and subsequently we always start at step two, ‘planning.’ You must understand a behaviour before you can change it. More specifically, you must understand a behaviour, who is doing it, what is causing it, what effect it is creating, and analyse (or preferably test) what and who can influence it to develop a successful strategy to deal with it. One might say this is the difference between a strategy and a plan.”

This approach usually leads to taskings for the communication functions – not for effects-based campaigns but for message campaigns and as it turns out, often for campaigns and products that resonated with command staff, not necessarily with Afghan target audiences.²⁰⁴ Tatham is a vocal critic of ISAF’s operations and in his view ISAF *never* understood the Afghan population. “And why would it?” he asks. “Most Target Audience Analysis analysts never left their desks; what field based research that was undertaken – principally by Human Terrain Teams – was done so under heavy force protection – not conducive to a meaningful research setting – and was invariably conducted through the filter of interpreters whose choice of words can as easily confuse

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 204 Gavriel explains this in more detail in a private exchange: "Here is a hypothetical example of these issues in action. Say that the influence objective is that 'women take part in education.' In absence of the ‘understand’ function, a seemingly obvious target audience (female Afghans) and supporting objective (women understand the importance of education) are selected, perhaps directed by a higher headquarters. Obvious supporting arguments are assumed. The campaign may have even been designed on pre-delivered messages such as 'education is important for women', 'education is a woman’s right', and 'education increases a woman’s economic viability'. It looks great on paper. It sounds great in meetings. What effect will it have? In the presence of an ‘understand’ function, the behaviour sought to be influenced will be examined: 'why do/do not women take part in education?' It is found that a minority of women do not see the value of an education and wish to remain in the household. A majority of women, however, do understand the value of an education and wish to be educated but are not permitted by their families to do so. Therefore, it can be ascertained that women, although performing the behaviour, are not responsible for the behaviour.

In this case, selecting women as the target audience will not create the desired effect. They are already compelled by the messages but they do not have the authority to act. Therefore, a new target audience must be selected — families, the one responsible for the behaviour. Now the target audience becomes rural male Afghans aged 25-45, the objective being that this audience comes to support female family members becoming educated.

The ‘understand’ function informs selection of an audience that can affect the behaviour (e.g. fathers and husbands, particularly in rural areas as this is where fewer women are being educated). Further research determines the varying influences that shape these perceptions/behaviours: (1) physical coercion by the Taliban; (2) belief that women should be home and protected; (3) social coercion – community dishonour if their women are required to work. However, interviewing finds that in the interest of protection they do not want the women in their families to be handled by men in professions such as midwifery, medical doctors, police searches, and even teaching. These jobs, it is agreed, are suitable for women and are also honourable professions. Messages are developed from this research:

- female doctors are important for the health of your wives and daughters.
- midwifery saves women’s lives.
- women in honourable positions brings prestige to the family.
- female police officers perform security checks to protect the honour of women.
- women in honourable positions doubles household income and brings honour to the family.

This is why the ‘understand’ function, as well as the research assets and time allocation required to support it, is so critical. It is the difference between success and wasted effort."

as clarify. Yet, throughout my tours to Afghanistan, at both operational and strategic level this absence of nuance never seemed to once bother either CJPOTF or more senior officers who were utterly fixated at polls that bore no resemblance to reality.”

The intelligence function also came under heavy criticism in 2010 with the finding by its own senior leadership that the vast majority of resources assigned to it were focused almost entirely on determining threats to the force:

“Lacking sufficient numbers of analysts and guidance from commanders, shops rarely gather, process, and write up quality assessments on countless items, such as: census data and patrol debriefs; minutes from shuras with local farmers and tribal leaders; after-action reports from civil affairs officers and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs); polling data and atmospheric reports from psychological operations and female engagement teams; and translated summaries of radio broadcasts that influence local farmers, not to mention the field observations of Afghan soldiers, United Nations officials, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This vast and underappreciated body of information, almost all of which is unclassified, admittedly offers few clues about where to find insurgents, but it does provide elements of even greater strategic importance – a map for leveraging popular support and marginalising the insurgency itself.”²⁰⁵

The nature of that finding was universally agreed by practitioners contacted for this report. One area amongst the group where views differed was the degree to which CJPOTF products were pre-tested – uniformed members generally being satisfied, civilian consultants less so. “The way we gauge audience reaction to our products is fraught with assumption and bias,” said one respondent from the latter category. “Print and TV products are pre-tested by Kabul - centric, NATO - friendly focus groups and we can go on survey data for specific things such as readership of the magazine. Still, there are a lot of Afghans involved in production.”

This view of a lack of sufficient understanding of Afghan audiences affected message selection and thus product development. “Separating the population from the insurgency was a key point of contention between CJPOTF and ‘other’ messaging assets,” recalled one observer. “One of the ongoing priorities has been to exploit un-Islamic behaviour and civilian casualties caused by insurgents to ensure that public support for the return of the Taliban was kept at a minimum.

.....
205 Michael Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul Batchelor. *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, January 2010, p. 7.

This inevitably meant someone somewhere creating products that demonised the insurgents, often using shock imagery in unattributed products. It's not an unreasonable effect to desire but requires nuance. The use of violent imagery was picked up by the BBC Pashto and discussed in Parliament. Many studies don't support the effectiveness of violent imagery and some of it was horrendously misplaced, like during televised sporting events. At the same time the population were also being encouraged to welcome insurgents back into their local community – often in the same ad break.”

Even in the face of solid evidence from quality studies though, there was still the business of convincing decision-makers of that in order to change tack. “We found substantial evidence that the standard ISAF response to Taliban causing civilian casualties was backfiring,” said another CJPOTF analyst. “ISAF had been using such events to demonise the insurgency, e.g.: “Look how bad the Taliban is.” Such responses caused audiences to believe the Taliban was gaining momentum while the government was unable to provide effective security to civilians. We elevated the matter to the Deputy Chief of Staff level where it sparked controversy. At least one 2-star general simply did not believe the findings and prevented the recommendations from reaching a broader audience within ISAF.”²⁰⁶ There remained strong interest amongst senior leaders, against the recommendations of the information community, to react publicly to civilian casualties and anything violent perpetrated by the insurgents, thereby alerting mainstream audiences to the Taliban's actions and effectiveness. NATO/ISAF's focus on showing Taliban brutality and violent imagery simply aided the insurgent's PSYOPS effort.

And, when armed with evidence and support from senior leadership, a further challenge still remained the balance of tenor and tone, always tricky and subject to many views and opinions. “ISAF could have done much more to manage the expectations of Afghans,” said John-Paul Gravelines who served in PSYOPS both as a military member and later as a civilian consultant, “particularly in light of the fact ISAF always knew that at some point it would cease to provide kinetic support to the Afghan security forces. Ten-plus years of heavy ISAF kinetic support to the Afghan security forces and positive messaging concerning them created lofty expectations of the government's ability to provide security. With ISAF kinetic support dwindling, Afghans are beginning to call into question any positive perceptions they previously had of their security forces.” Thus, messaging challenges abound.

Lack of Continuity of Vision and Unity of Effort. Absent a transition plan, measures of effectiveness, and lacking the continuity of senior staff to lead and direct the effort, the capabilities and functions CJPOTF required to operate was based less on analysis and more on personal opinions of Command staff as to how the group should be affected by manning and budget cuts.

“There were five Chief Ops/Plans in the unit during my time there who didn’t have significant PSYOPS or media experience and were only here for six-month tours,” recalled one CJPOTF long-timer. “Two of them were only here for three months. More time was spent training them than they contributed.” This highlights a significant point that affected many aspects of the ISAF campaign overall – a rotating command chair and nation-focused, loosely related but separate campaigns. “It was truly appalling, with regional set-ups where everybody just did their own national thing, like refusing to take the CJPOTF radio product to broadcast in their area,” recalled another consultant. For instance, though NATO guidelines specifically identified that PSYOPS products were to avoid quoting religious texts, highlighting un-Islamic ideology in various leaflets was a practice in RC (East), and while the “messages were perfectly acceptable, it was questionable in the eyes of the target audience whether unbelievers should be quoting the Koran,” and this was made worse since at one point materials were dropped from an aircraft and would land on the ground, thereby sullyng the holy words.²⁰⁷

The U.S. operated their own theatre-level MISO effort through Operation Enduring Freedom but up until mid-2009 with the appointment of the U.S. Deputy Chief of Staff Communication, only loosely in conjunction with CJPOTF, in large measure because of security restrictions (those in charge not being part of the Five Eyes community governing access to that intelligence).²⁰⁸ A significant amount of money was available to them so “they played their own game by outsourcing products to civilian contractors and NGOs without applying the methodology of analysis, pre-testing and approval as usual in the PSYOPS world, until finally they at least would apply ISAF product approval procedures and to coordinate and synchronise their products as part of the overall information campaign,” recalled a senior officer.

.....
207 Munoz (2012), p. 21.

208 Interview with senior CJPOTF staff member from that period.

But a single chain of command did not necessarily mean a conjoined effort. Despite being warned to steer clear of any messaging on the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), television spots appeared featuring “people-on-the-street” interviews with Afghans saying the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) was a good thing in an effort to pressure President Karzai and Afghan authorities, none of whom were too pleased at the campaign (nor was the U.S. Embassy).²⁰⁹ Notwithstanding, in September 2014 the BSA and a similar agreement with NATO were signed. It was a good example of the grey area in which CJPOTF often found itself.

Concern Over Quality of the Product. Frequent leader turnover and the general lack of related experience of the senior-most functional heads was a constraining factor. Moreover, today’s media environment, including in Afghanistan, is extremely competitive. The creative function is too important not to seriously engage people who do this for a living, and if there is any one lesson to come from the PSYOPS effort it would be to stop thinking that the military can do this by itself. That is not to denigrate the work of full-time military professionals, but there are many civilians with experience at managing and running competitive media outlets which suggests, if not major outsourcing then at a minimum, more effective pairing of military and civilian in leadership positions, not just at the staff level.

For instance, in April 2011, 13 of the 14 positions relating to command, planning and media director were military, all of which would regularly rotate (Figure 14). As a CJPOTF staffer explains, “a media director with no explicit experience and a helicopter pilot as Chief StratCom is simply not a good combination. It is an art to connect with audiences, requiring a nuance of words, images, selection of shots, all of which need to be crafted to obtain effective, emotive product. Don’t ask me to fly the helicopter, and don’t ask the pilot to oversee a communication campaign. The environment calls for professionals with a proven background in editorial print content, television, and radio, with strong incentives for quality, consistent product.”²¹⁰

“In my civilian practice my job was informing, educating and entertaining, and I had to turn a profit to stay in that job. Therefore, nothing was more important to me than how we portrayed ourselves in terms of a branding mechanism, what we broadcast and how that was received,” recalled Austen. “This is where the military gets it wrong. It has PSYOPS, media ops, influence ops, civil affairs, StratCom, internal comms, intelligence, and, I am sure, a few other departments. All, doctrinally, doing its own thing, which is just rubbish. Plus,

.....
209 Confidential interview.

210 Interview with CJPOTF member who was involved in production.

“

It is by far the most expensive of the communication capabilities in terms of human and financial resources, yet (at least within NATO) does not seem to have been subject to particular oversight.

”

each campaign had to start from Ground Zero because it had no commonality of presentation, as everything was geared to that rotation.”

Feedback on ISAF products obtained from a senior, experienced firm that worked closely with ISAF in theatre supports the practitioners' views that over time, the military-led effort was one-dimensional (a 'hammer to every nail'), with literal messaging and a mainly reactive approach to an event or crisis, rather than a

continuous series of programming including during periods of relative stability thereby building audience affinity. In particular, noted the firm's head, “was a lack of proper attitude and behavioural change campaigns: most campaigns sought to change behaviours but did not provide adequate time to do so, the duration being based on reactions rather than foresight.”²¹¹

Lack of Oversight and the Isolation of PSYOPS. A common refrain of communication practitioners contacted for this report was that the PSYOPS community on balance was a cliquish community, a view that was not at all helped by usually being physically set apart from the rest of the headquarters. To the extent that is true, it was in part self-imposed and also a function of its name and the associations with it: to some, it was the “Dark Arts”. Communities purport to understand what PSYOPS does, but that seems to be a view based on familiarity of the product suite, not based on knowledge of tools, techniques, needs and methodologies. It is by far the most expensive of the communication capabilities in terms of human and financial resources, yet (at least within NATO) does not seem to have been subject to particular oversight, audit or even general interest from at least the NATO strategic-level HQs, or the NATO Joint Lessons Learned Centre.

This regrettable situation manifests itself in theatre because of various interlocutors acting on their behalf with the Commander and the Command Group, and which can include Info Ops or Strat Com, and J3/J5 Operations generally. As information environment specialists, the group should have expected to work more closely at higher levels in order to impart advice and views particularly on unusual developments, including in cases such as when the Taliban opened an office in Doha, and “no-one seemed to know what to do. General Dunford was eager for recommendations but was apparently surrounded by people who didn’t know what was going on or what to do about it. He said, ‘you’ve sat and stared at this problem for a few days now, let’s get the experts involved’, and after that we had regular interactions with him.”²¹²

There was also interest in having a product or set of products *now* to deal with a particular issue that happened to be topical, which drove an operational expectation and interest around how long it would take to develop products. Requests for ‘what is PSYOPS doing about X,’ particularly Afghan civilian casualties, were frequent, with senior communications staff interested in quantitative measures of performance like ‘how many spots per hour, and how many of that product have been distributed’, as if “the weight of fire somehow equated to being effective.”²¹³

The Firewall between Public Affairs and PSYOPS. Both the literature and practitioners make clear that the doctrinal firewall between Public Affairs and PSYOPS is a major constraint to more effective, joined up communications. How can the HQ expect to avoid information fratricide and pursue the realisation of joint objectives such as support to elections or security force recruiting when at times, a Public Affairs officer won’t even agree to be in the same room as PSYOPS or Info Ops, so as to ensure no taint of ‘influence’ on ‘inform’ activities?²¹⁴ Discord between functions is harmful and leads to a lack of shared endeavour, and which some practitioners say was exacerbated with the elimination of the one-star StratCom head in the ISAF Joint Command in late 2013. This situation of less-than-harmonious relations amongst communication and information capabilities is not limited just to Public Affairs though that function looks to be the most intransigent of the lot.

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212 Interview with International Civilian Consultant Ben Heap.

213 Ibid.

214 This author always thought this to be an urban myth, but at least three practitioners who discussed the issue for this report insist that it is true. "The firewall is a fact. The ISAF Joint Command Public Affairs during my time had no interface with CJPOTF. However, CJPOTF did interact with Public Affairs at ISAF on a weekly basis." [Exchange with Info Ops officer].

The Role, Place and Balance of Effort between Doing, Partnering, and Facilitating. NATO operational and information doctrine is shy about the respective role, time and place for when the communication disciplines should ‘partner’ or ‘facilitate’ instead of ‘doing’ all activities on their own. “The answer to adversarial propaganda is not more propaganda,” advises a CJPOTF employee of long-standing. “Afghanistan has a very modern media sector which is more efficient than NATO forces at generating content that audiences want. They are also broadly supportive of the government and the Afghan security forces because their business model and future depends on stability. It would have been much more effective to run programmes through these media companies as opposed to doing it all ourselves. All we did is clog up the airwaves with ‘propaganda’ of dubious quality.”²¹⁵

In Afghanistan, much anti-government messaging was done through radio programs, cassettes, videos, or a consequence of Taliban intimidation tactics including night letters and through admonition to listen to particular broadcasts of their own making or face death, this being a particularly effective incentive especially in rural areas.²¹⁶ As German Colonel Richard Welter, twice-CJPOTF commander recalled, even if measurable effects from CJPOTF activities could be attributed to specific events, the longer-term effect was limited “because the Taliban were more effective and easily outweighed our efforts with their ruthlessness and their credible threats to the lives of those Afghans who opposed their demands or cooperated with the Afghan government or ISAF.”²¹⁷

One way around that was to enable Afghan authorities and civil society at large to share and amplify their voices throughout the country. “We’ve got to be able to counter [Taliban] with our own penetration into those communities,” said Rear-Admiral Greg Smith, from 2009-2011, the first ISAF Deputy Chief of Staff Communication. “We’ve got to be able, and the government has to be able, to find the credible voices that can speak for themselves. I term this ‘empowering conversation ... to create capacity that allows for strong indigenous voices to be heard amongst that population ... there are plenty of Afghan people who lack the wherewithal simply to have a vehicle to have a voice. And if it’s a matter of increased cell phone towers so more people can have access to cell phones to communicate amongst themselves through text messaging or just voice communications, if it’s the lack of penetration of existing FM transmissions of an indigenous radio station ... that simply [needs]

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215 Interview with CJPOTF member who was involved in production.

216 Greg Bruno, "Winning the Information War in Afghanistan and Pakistan". Council on Foreign Relations, 11 May 2009.

217 September 2007 to June 2008 and July 2010 to April 2011.

the wherewithal to extend their reach, that's where we need to partner."²¹⁸ With that however, is the patience not to get overly excited when NATO forces don't like what these forces (within reason!) say.

Enabling the independent media sector and concurrently building Afghan capacity were two long-term, continuous investments that required, as one official put it, more than "drive-by mentoring," the effort perennially challenged by a series of continually changes faces, priorities and different views about helping Afghans develop their own capability. Creating this space for positive discourse by helping build Afghan government capacity to communicate with the population was a slow effort that did not begin in earnest until at least half way through the mission, and then accelerated in the end with the realisation that in 2013, the Afghans were in the security lead and that by end-2014, "that was it, they were responsible for it all."

During the 2013-2014 tour of U.S. Army XVIII Airborne Corps for instance, the ISAF Joint Command Info Ops group spent considerable sums and effort – up to 80 per cent of its time recalled the Director Info Ops at the time – to enable Afghan capacity to communicate, including almost \$3 million to equip the Afghan National Army, Public Affairs training for government officials, and funding Regional Media Centres. In addition, PSYOPS established an Afghan Information Dissemination Operations course, equipping classrooms and exporting curriculum.²¹⁹ It is interesting to speculate on the outcomes had this been a major focus of effort of ISAF from the first days of its tenure in theatre.

Activities to Continue to Support. The literature review, practitioner feedback and this report's assessment is that the following initiatives bear repeating in future NATO operations:

- the concept of Forward Media Teams, considered to be very effective at generating content and providing local feedback.
- Target Audience Analysis cells, and information fusion units which can then generate (and share) a common situational awareness and picture. This requires the development and dedication of social science research assets.
- until such time as NATO military forces professionalise the functions as a full-time capability, continue to use civilian consultants on the Crisis Establishment to provide continuity of effort and experienced, proven staff who have worked in related civilian sectors.

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218 Interviewed in "Countering the Taliban's Message in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Council on Foreign Relations, 11 May 2009.

219 Exchange with Colonel Frank Decarvalho, U.S. Army.

- use of local staff which provide good understanding of target audiences (even if short on training, initially).
- facilitate the establishment (or re-establishment as the case may be) of a vibrant, indigenous communications culture.
- a greater synchronisation of effort, preferably with one knowledgeable person in charge of all the function across all areas and regions, and drawing on personnel with experience in the civilian sector of how to run and manage a competitive news and media organisation. This is predicated of course, on a careful reflection of what channels of communication the military force should be in ('do', 'partner', or 'facilitate').

Table 2: Different Views Of The World: Frequent Characterisations Of And By Information Related Capability Communities During The Isaf Campaign

WHAT THIS GROUP	TENDS TO THINK OF THIS GROUP	CHARACTERISATIONS
Command Group	StratCom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “An essential strategic asset. Needs to figure out how to translate advice into systems that help realise Commander’s intent” ● Can be hard to differentiate outputs from Info Ops and Public Affairs ● “Need to find a way to unlock its potential; when that happens, it will be an operational game-changer”
	Info Ops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Still think of it mainly as a group of related capabilities rather than an integrating function across all staff ● Technical sub-components and operational deception are important part of ‘friendly’ defence and offense against adversary ● Considerably better at technical elements than at influencing adversary behaviours ● Looks to be integrated into operational planning process
	PSYOPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Process, product and place in operations is clearly understood – “they seem to produce a lot” ● Products look to be informed by a process (research, development, testing, approval), bound within and directly supportive of Ops, with performance that can be measured and quantified, if imperfectly
	Public Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Good for crisis management, well plugged into higher HQs – a very effective ‘tech net’ ● Tends be one-dimensional (media relations), focused on immediate tactical, not medium to long-term outcomes ● Trusted agent and important part of the specialist advisor community
	NATO HQ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Agent and voice of Secretary General”; very focused on story of the day and tactical sound bite ● Lacks appreciation that Command is multi-faceted and being in public eye is important part of contributing to understanding of mission and to the political-military Centre of Gravity ● “A little too eager to call military to task for comments in an media article without knowing context” ● Does not see this body as actively taking responsibility for Alliance-wide StratCom
StratCom	Command Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The default is to kinetic short-term effect rather than to longer term ‘solutions’ through information effect ● Those who have been on complex operations are now beginning to understand impact and importance of StratCom ● Now more willingness to incorporate communications into policy, planning and implementation ● Rotational and short term basis of most deployments means Command Group event horizon tends to end with their tour

WHAT THIS GROUP	TENDS TO THINK OF THIS GROUP	CHARACTERISATIONS
StratCom	StratCom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When applied properly, is a means to inform the full suite of military activities including actions, words and signalling to realise desired behaviours in target audiences
	Info Ops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has valuable tools at its disposal (like Target Audience Analysis) that are not well leveraged due to firewalls between practitioners A function struggling to find its place, but with increased appetite for clarification of division of labour between it and StratCom
	PSYOPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A valuable function with significant potential but which are too used to 'doing their own thing'
	Public Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skilled at reacting to breaking issues but generally are poor planners Wedded to old model of communications and want to continue to do media operations which is their comfort zone Good at protecting their turf. Don't accept that their efforts should be guided by StratCom (or any other info-related discipline) Focus tends to be facilitating 'coverage' for its own sake versus 'achieving operational effect'
	NATO HQ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overly and overtly media-focused. Lacks capacity and capability to lead and guide efforts as set out in NATO StratCom policy
Info Ops	Command Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More often than not, when referring to InfoOps, is likely to mean Public Affairs and PSYOPS
	StratCom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (In U.S.) There is no such thing as military StratCom, only national-level StratCom Separates information-related community from operational planners (including putting in separate offices or buildings) Places flag officers with little understanding of any of the functional elements over trained information community practitioners Most StratCom is Public Affairs, Info Ops or PSYOPS work taken from across the staff, with little added-value
	Info Ops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Function is working hard to find ways to demonstrate effect and value for investment Within NATO, almost completely dependent on U.S. assets and personnel for any trained, experienced capability
	PSYOPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overlapping missions. Info Ops has no assets so relies on PSYOPS, whose development process can't always match the op tempo
	Public Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refuses to accept being coordinated Very focused on "chasing news clips", tend to be good at crisis communications but poor long-term planners
	NATO HQ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overly and overtly media-focused Lacks capacity and capability to lead, direct and guide efforts as set out in NATO StratCom policy

WHAT TO THINK OF THIS GROUP	TENDS TO THINK OF THIS GROUP	CHARACTERISATIONS
PSYOPS	Command Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not challenge the function enough; should be more interested in accountability for outcomes given resources expended Feels isolated. Practitioners told to do products but not often asked how to realise desired Comd Group outcomes
	StratCom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While in favour of synchronisation, “In ISAF, StratCom staff had no background or training; at best, enthusiastic amateurs”
	Info Ops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be an issue determining who leads reaching out to target foreign audiences, particularly with local media Very dependent on personalities. Few nations have capability. Resents their expertise being subject to untrained interlocutor(s)
	PSYOPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skilled behavioural and influence specialists
Public Affairs	Public Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be a struggle with Public Affairs over primacy in conducting activities with target foreign audiences: is dealing with indigenous media an influence (PSYOPS), or inform (Public Affairs) activity? Public Affairs is just another voice to contend with during product development
	NATO HQ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides authority to target specific audiences
Public Affairs	Command Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs to be protected from bad advice of other information disciplines that could negatively impact credibility of the command Public Affairs is a command function and direct reporting relationship to Commander is not negotiable Most Commanders ‘get it’ but may lack experience dealing with attention and pressure of high visibility operations Expectations can be unreasonable: regards outcomes as positive only if coverage is positive (not, ‘less bad’)
	StratCom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prone to giving advice rather than facilitating coordination through tools, products and processes to assist synchronisation Value-added and actual tangible output is not obvious, lots of talk about ‘what others should do’ not ‘what we will do’ Terrified of leaving alone with Commander as principal interlocutor on communication-related issues “Only outputs at ISAF provided to the Comd was interagency Public Affairs talking points and outputs from Info Ops planning”
	Info Ops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concern that ‘end justifies the means’ including willingness to use falsification thru media, thus a danger to organisational credibility when even remotely affiliated with Public Affairs Interest in functional oversight is to direct Public Affairs to change products so as to overtly ‘influence’ vice ‘inform’ Fears that unrestricted foray into social media outside orbit of Public Affairs will damage organisational credibility Some useful planning tools and methodologies that could be better utilised

WHAT THIS GROUP	TENDS TO THINK OF THIS GROUP	CHARACTERISATIONS
Public Affairs	PSYOPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some useful tools and products but has tendency not to share until a product is issued • Lacks cultural awareness necessary for best effect but when done right, offers valuable insights into foreign communities • Generates Public Affairs issues • Lack of openness and transparency about process and product generates suspicion about practises
Public Affairs	Public Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the organisational conscience and principal defender within the information functions of organisational credibility. Truthful at all times. Is allergic to the prospect of 'being directly or indirectly associated with groups that may deceive • Direct access to the Commander is sacrosanct • The media component is <u>the</u> force multiplier to achieve effects in domestic national and local information space. Multiple voices, when aligned, are a tremendous message multiplier • Acknowledges that the group is not as effective at long term planning as could be. This is not a function of an inherent inability, but a result of the effort expended to fight daily media battle and produce quality products for immediate use
NATO HQ	NATO HQ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple voices are a problem, not a message multiplier. Looks for reasons to narrow the number of voices to – theirs • Media Operations function and the staff are very accessible. Products from Media Operations Centre are of quality and value • Should not be the voice of the Secretary General to a Commander. Guidance and direction needs to come from the chain of command, not thru military Public Affairs • When media coverage is not to their liking, military are not afforded the same benefit of the doubt as civilian officials. Bad outcomes are treated as 'something that was actually said or not done', not a 'media misinterpretation'
NATO HQ	Command Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be a force multiplier in the information battle space but is prone to being "off message" • Generally fine when speaking about tactical issues but beyond that is outside their area of responsibility. Not sophisticated enough as a group to 'get' the political side. General officer rank is tipping point for real credibility • Difficult to know at times if Commander is speaking for 'NATO' or for 'their nation' • Visibility draws from Secretary General as top NATO authority, but adds credibility when 'on message' and scripted ahead of time
StratCom	StratCom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "StratCom is Public Affairs on steroids"; "Yet to demonstrate significant value-added to NATO's overall communications effort, despite the creation of a StratCom cell in PDD, SHAPE, StratCom, and numerous experts in ISAF and other NATO operations" • Is an effort by military communicators to wrest authority and approvals from PDD to military command(s) as a means for them to operate with less oversight and control by civilian authorities
Info Ops	Info Ops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness to use deception marks them as a danger to organisational credibility if directly associated with NATO PA/PDD • Little visibility over what they do. Can be suspicious of motives and actions particularly during Phase 0 when no Operational Plan

WHAT TO THINK OF THIS GROUP	TENDS TO THINK OF THIS GROUP	CHARACTERISATIONS
NATO HQ	PSYOPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Little visibility over what they do. Pretty sure that falsification is part of the PSYOPS remit, but is a military line of activity that on balance does not seem to create problems for NATO HQ ● Understands that target is foreign audiences; but, unless major operations underway, don't want any affiliation with it ● If NAC and Secretary General direct all NATO StratCom, then products including PSYOPS should be approved at NATO HQ
	Public Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● May technically work for their Commander but civilian authorities trump military thus if not a 'uniformed detachment' of Public Diplomacy Division, then a firm 'dotted line' ● A direct means of delivering public affairs guidance from Secretary General office to a Commander
	NATO HQ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● NAC and Secretary General direct all NATO Strategic Communications, civilian and military ● Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy is responsible for overall coordination of NATO StratCom, civilian and military (excepting, press and media who report to Secretary General through the NATO Spokesperson)

Legend. Green: the function is well understood; outputs are valued; capability or line of activity with defined operational boundaries; not seen as a direct threat in the information space. People know what they do and what to expect. *Issues that arise are generally caused by lack of capability or capacity.*

Yellow: the function is generally well understood but issues frequently arise; outputs are desired; capability or line of activity can be prone to 'straying outside' lanes; absent direct oversight, view is that this capability creates problems in the information space. *Issues that arise are generally caused by personalities.*

Red: the function is not well understood; outputs are not particularly well known; function is inherently distrusted and viewed as a cause for direct concern. Relations are often sub-optimal. *Issues that arise generally relate to core, fundamental disagreements about role and place in the information space.*

Methodology. During interviews, exchanges and discussions over the course of the report research period, practitioners from each group were asked their views about practitioners from other groups. A blank version of this table was also distributed via email to 25 practitioners from Public Affairs, Info Ops, PSYOPS and StratCom communities. Views are a representative sampling of the types of observations typically expressed or most strongly held. Phrases in quotation marks are direct quotes.

Table 3: ISAF Force Structure: Selected Elements, 2002-2014

DATE	TCNs	ISAF	OEF	RC(C)	RC(S)	RC(W)	RC(N)	RC(E)	USA	GBR	CAN	FRA	DEU	ITA	POL
2007 29 JAN	37	35,460	8,000	4,700	11,500	1,900	3,000	10,500	14,000	5,200	2,500	1,000	3,000	1,950	160
20 APR	37	36,750	15,000	5,000	11,500	2,100	3,000	13,500	15,000	5,200	2,500	1,000	3,000	1,950	300
31 MAY	37	41,000	8,000	5,000	9,000	2,000	3,700	16,500	17,000	6,700	2,500	1,000	3,000	1,950	1,100
13 JUL	37	41,000	8,000	4,820	8,661	2,402	3,141	13,766	14,750	6,500	2,500	800	3,000	2,500	1,075
10 SEP	37	41,000	8,000	5,000	10,000	2,500	3,200	13,900	15,154	6,678	3,079	978	2,908	2,573	943
22 OCT	38	41,144	7,000	4,800	4,600	2,500	3,300	13,900	15,108	7,740	1,730	1,073	3,155	2,395	937
5 DEC	39	41,700	7,000	3,300	11,700	2,500	3,400	14,300	15,038	7,753	1,730	1,292	3,155	2,358	1,141
2008 6 FEB	40	43,250	16,000	3,000	19,000	2,300	4,000	15,000	15,000	7,800	2,500	1,515	3,210	2,880	1,100
1 APR	40	47,000		5,800	18,000	2,600	4,700	16,000	19,000	7,750	2,500	1,430	3,490	2,360	1,020
3 JUN	40	52,900	10,500	5,900	23,800	2,500	4,300	16,400	23,550	8,530	2,500	1,670	3,370	2,350	1,140
1 SEP	40	47,600	19,000	6,300	19,100	2,500	4,200	15,500	17,790	8,380	2,500	2,660	3,220	2,350	1,130
6 OCT	41	50,700		5,420	19,100	2,980	4,400	18,800	20,600	8,330	2,500	2,730	3,310	2,350	1,130
25 NOV	41	51,100		5,850	17,900	3,000	4,690	19,660	19,950	8,745	2,500	2,785	3,600	2,350	1,130
2009 12 JAN	41	55,100		5,250	22,360	3,050	4,470	19,570	23,220	8,910	2,830	2,890	3,405	2,350	1,590
13 FEB	41	56,420		5,740	22,000	2,940	4,740	21,000	24,900	8,300	2,830	2,780	3,460	2,350	1,590
13 MAR	42	61,960		5,740	22,330	2,940	5,080	25,870	29,820	8,300	2,830	2,780	3,640	2,350	1,590
15 JUN	42	61,130		5,775	27,880	2,960	4,870	19,645	28,850	8,300	2,830	2,780	3,380	2,350	2,000
23 JUL	42	64,500		6,200	29,400	3,400	5,600	19,900	29,950	9,000	2,800	3,160	4,050	2,795	2,000
1 OCT	42	67,700		6,400	34,855	4,400	5,600	16,255	31,855	9,000	2,830	3,070	4,245	2,795	2,025

DATE	TCNs	ISAF	OEF	RC(C)	RC(S)	RC(W)	RC(N)	RC(E)	USA	GBR	CAN	FRA	DEU	ITA	POL
2010 1 FEB	43	85,795		6,300	45,100	4,600	5,895	24,900	47,085	9,500	2,830	3,750	4,415	3,150	1,955
5 MAR	44	89,480		4,990	47,300	5,000	5,950	23,340	50,590	9,500	2,830	3,750	4,335	3,160	2,140
16 APR	46	102,500	5,000	54,500		5,500	7,500	26,500	62,415	9,500	2,830	3,750	4,665	3,300	2,515
7 JUN	46	119,500	5,000	65,000		6,000	8,000	32,000	78,430	9,500	2,830	3,750	4,350	3,300	2,500
6 AUG	47	119,819	5,000	35,000	27,000	6,000	11,000	32,000	78,430	9,500	2,830	3,750	4,590	3,400	2,630
15 NOV	48	130,930							90,000	9,500	2,922	3,850	4,341	3,688	2,519
2011 3 FEB	48	132,000							90,000	9,500	2,905	4,000	4,920	3,770	2,490
16 MAY	48	132,305							90,000	9,500	2,920	4,005	5,000	3,880	2,530
6 JUN	48	132,381							90,000	9,500	2,922	3,935	4,812	3,880	2,560
26 JUL	48	132,457							90,000	9,500	2,922	3,935	4,812	3,880	2,560
9 SEP	49	130,670							90,000	9,500	556	3,916	4,818	3,952	2,475
8 DEC	49	130,313							90,000	9,500	556	3,916	4,818	3,952	2,475
2012 9 JAN	50	129,895							90,000	9,500	510	3,491	4,715	3,956	2,472
16 MAR	50	129,186							90,000	9,500	506	3,524	4,834	3,815	2,456
15 MAY	50	129,469							90,000	9,500	950	3,279	4,701	3,986	2,420
1 AUG	50	129,469							90,000	9,500	950	3,279	4,701	3,986	2,420
10 SEP	50	112,579							74,400	9,500	950	2,453	4,645	4,000	2,432
4 DEC	50	102,011							68,000	9,500	950	543	4,318	4,000	1,770
2013 14 FEB	50	100,316							68,000	9,000	950	550	4,400	3,067	1,739
19 APR	50	100,330							68,000	9,000	950	459	4,400	3,049	1,744

DATE	TCNs	ISAF	OEF	RC(C)	RC(S)	RC(W)	RC(N)	RC(E)	USA	GBR	CAN	FRA	DEU	ITA	POL
1 JUN	50	97,813							68,000	8,065	950	455	4,400	3,034	1,741
1 AUG	49	87,207							60,000	7,700	950	266	4,400	2,825	1,177
1 OCT	49	86,834							60,000	7,900	950	235	4,400	2,826	1,553
1 DEC	49	84,271							60,000	7,953	620	212	3,084	2,822	1,099
2014															
15 JAN	49	57,004							38,000	5,200	265	205	3,077	2,159	967
20 FEB	49	52,686							33,600	5,200	105	210	2,938	2,165	971
1 APR	48	51,176							33,500	5,200	-	211	2,730	2,019	968
1 JUN	48	49,902							32,800	5,200	-	177	2,695	2,000	968
3 SEP	48	41,124							28,970	3,906	-	88	1,599	1,411	304
7 NOV	48	28,360							18,180	2,837	-	90	1,707	1,400	65
RESOLUTE SUPPORT 2015/JUNE	42	13,223							6,834	470	-	-	850	500	150

Troop Contributing Nations for ISAF I, II, III¹

ISAF I (19): BEL, CZR, DEN, FRA, DEU, GBR, GRC, ITA, NDR, NOR, POR, SPA, TUR; AUS, BUL, FIN, ROM, SWE, NZL
 ISAF II (22): BEL, CZR, DEN, FRA, DEU, GBR, GRC, ITA, NDR, NOR, POR, SPA, TUR; ALB, AUS, AZE, BUL, FIN, FYROM, IRE, LIT, NZL, ROM, SWE,
 ISAF III (29): BEL, CZR, DEN, FRA, DEU, GBR, GRC, HUN, ICE, ITA, NDR, NOR, SPA, TUR; ALB, AUS, AZE, BUL, CRO, EST, FIN, FYROM, IRE, LAT, LIT,
 NZL, ROM, SWE, SWI

The calculation of national force contributions can vary because different nations 'count' and report forces differently. This report uses the 'ISAF place mat'—a chart issued by the NATO PDD Media Operations Centre on a regular basis since 29 Jan 2007, generally in advance of defence or foreign affairs ministerial meetings or Summits. In late 2010, the placemats stopped identifying figures for the individual regions.

In January 2007, the largest contributing nations to the 37-nation strong UN-mandated, NATO-led coalition was US (1); UK (2); DEU (3); CAN (4); ITA (5); FRA (6). By July of that year POL had become the 8th largest contributor of forces.

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 1 Diego Ruiz Palmer, "Road to Kabul," *NATO Review*, Summer 2003. See <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2003/issue2/english/art3.html>

CHAPTER 5: DOCTRINE: THE UNENDING QUEST FOR A GRAND UNIFIED THEORY OF COMMUNICATION(S)



Photos: NATO/ISAF

*“The successful planning, execution and support of military operations requires a clearly understood and implemented doctrine, and this is especially important when operations are to be conducted by multinational forces.”*¹

NATO AJP-01(D), Preface

*“I’ve often felt that there’s a special place in hell reserved for the person who first foisted the term “strategic communication” on the Defense Department. The term itself was a corporate import, and a pernicious one.”*²

Rosa Brooks

OVERVIEW

The experience of recent contemporary operations demonstrates that the case for effective StratCom is unequivocal – progress towards that state has been achieved in fits and starts over the period of the ISAF mission. Operators across NATO militaries now more readily consider inform, influence and persuade activities as part of force packages. Some NATO High Readiness Headquarters have evolved structures to incorporate lessons learned from ISAF. A Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence has been created. The Readiness Action Plan has committed the Alliance to greater investments in StratCom, and a Military Committee (MC) StratCom Policy is being considered by the MC. These are all positive outcomes.

Still, the prospective role, place and implementation of StratCom in military and in political-military HQs across the Alliance continue to vex and to defy easy resolution. It is not hard to see why. The name lacks terminological precision. Many definitions abound though there is broad agreement on its constituent parts and the merits of what it purports to achieve. NATO StratCom doctrine does not exist – neither within the U.S. or the UK³ – and while once there was just a smattering of related policy, guidelines and pre-doctrinal publications they now exist in abundance, at times at odds or unhelpfully ambiguous. The situation is largely a function of a running debate about whether StratCom should be considered a process, a mindset, or a capability. This in turn generates a more intense disagreement around the extent to which it should be resourced, at what level it is conducted (political-military, strategic, operational, tactical), and whether to vest it with explicit authorities to direct communication and information functions.

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1 NATO AJP-01(D), Preface.

2 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/06/confessions-of-a-strategic-communicator/>

3 The NATO 2009 StratCom policy has been included in keystone and capstone doctrine and Allied Joint Publications (AJP) 1, 3 and 5. The U.S. and UK both have approved Joint Doctrine *Notes* which is not approved doctrine: footnote 20 provides additional detail.

To discern how effective NATO StratCom was during the ISAF mission we first need to understand what StratCom means or what it aspires to in order to compare theory with policy and then with actual practice. This chapter explores in some depth how StratCom is defined at NATO, both from a political-military policy and operational doctrine perspective. Chapter 6 walks through how StratCom policy and doctrine evolved at NATO HQ, thereby setting up chapter 7 to assess ‘how’ it fared at ISAF, and chapter 8 to ascertain if ISAF is a good model on which to base recommendations to guide future NATO communications efforts. Here in chapter 5, characteristics of the StratCom ideal will be identified. Various select definitions and principles of StratCom will be compared, including prominent verb selection from the policies to understand the desired effects of each. This is followed by an overview of the current situation and an outline of the nature of the problem. The paper then explores six core issues that inhibit leaders, operators and communication and information communities from realising greater return on the effort.

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT (BLUF)

The inherent challenges to achieving agreed, integrated NATO doctrine, policy, directives and guidelines, and to realising better communication and information effect outcomes in practice relate to:

- the question of whether StratCom is a process, mindset, capability or combination thereof (thereby indicating structure, reporting relationships and resources);
- the need to distinguish between two separate but related sets of communication activities: the ‘inform and educate’ Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs activities at NATO HQs directed toward NATO member nations and international audiences; and the ‘inform, influence and persuade’ activities that NATO military HQ undertake that, following political authority for operations, include actions that employ the full spectrum of communication and information capabilities such as defensive and offensive Info Ops, PSYOPS, military deception⁴, and Public Affairs (to name a few), all within a construct that counts kinetic actions as a targeting activity.

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 4 Military deception is usually understood by non-military audiences to mean ‘lying’. In reality, deception operations are actions to deliberately mislead adversary decision makers about friendly force intentions, strengths, and intended operations. This can lead adversaries to misallocate their own forces and cause them to do things that are advantageous to friendly forces. It can be as simple as varying patrol times or letting adversaries believe forces are somewhere when they are not. Coordination with Public Affairs and Info Ops is important to effective deception operations. Deception should be distinguished from falsification, or telling mistruths.

- the paucity of robust national, expeditionary communication and information-related capabilities;
- the four firewalls embedded within the communication and information community (Public Affairs/PSYOPS, Public Affairs/Info Ops, Political/Military, Foreign/Domestic audiences) need to be re-examined in light of globally connected audiences and the widespread availability of social media. It is critical that the credibility of NATO public information be maintained and even enhanced, but firewalls constrain the ability to coordinate and synchronise concurrent effort across all communication functions. Existing firewalls hurt, not help, Alliance credibility, and the lack of a policy/structural fix provides advantage to adversaries.
- the role and place for Info Ops within NATO military HQs, given StratCom.
- Within NATO the current concept of Info Ops as a staff function that coordinates some of the same things that StratCom is meant to inform, integrate and synchronise creates confusion and animosity. At issue is whether two such functions are required; and presuming this to still be the case, decide how to allocate work between them. Until this separation of responsibilities is resolved, the discontinuity will continue to hamper the realisation of StratCom objectives.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely agreed amongst the scientific community that there are four fundamental forces of nature: gravity, strong nuclear, weak nuclear and electromagnetic. They all exhibit different characteristics and properties that individually are understood. However, the way that the forces interact with each other thereby governing the behaviour of matter in the universe is not explained by one theoretical framework. The ‘standard model’ accounts for three of the four forces – gravity is the outlier and happens to be the most important since it affects all matter and acts over cosmological distance. Notwithstanding years of effort by the best minds in the field, there is as yet no Grand Unified Theory. This is an equation that if derived “would then encompass some set of principles, axioms and equations that would tell you what the field is for all space and time and tell you how it behaves under changes in its parameters. In principle it would provide some predictive capability given some initial input.”⁵

This situation is analogous to the doctrine, practice and experience of the communication and information-related capability communities and the search by political and military authorities for a StratCom framework which in theory and practice finally makes sense of it all. Conceptually there are three main communication and information disciplines or ‘fields’, these being the capabilities of Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs and PSYOPS. The coordination and synchronization functions of Info Ops and StratCom constitute ‘gravity’, the fourth fundamental force meant to bind the rest together.⁶ As integrating staff functions they remain outliers, acknowledged as important but not yet able to build an agreed and accepted fundamental understanding of how they are meant to relate, impact and influence each of the other fields. The concept is central to the meaning of the Alliance Political Centre of Gravity for missions, most often defined as “maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance.”

Three capabilities are generally well known: Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs and PSYOPS. Tasking authorities and responsibilities are clearly understood. They each produce familiar products and outputs that can be reviewed, edited, approved, issued, and observed. To a certain extent their effects can be measured.

However, finding a formula that political-military communities throughout NATO can agree that explains the interactions and guides those combined efforts has been a challenge. The information environment, after all, is defined by NATO and some national doctrine as comprising “the information itself, the individuals, organisations and systems that receive, process and convey the information, and the cognitive, virtual and physical space in which this occurs”⁷ ... so then, *everything*. Influencing that in a precisely desired way is made fantastically more difficult if it is accepted that all actions – whether big or small, kinetic or otherwise – communicates something to somebody somewhere: as does doing nothing.⁸ A structure informed by such a Grand Unified Theory would be predictive – Target Audience Analysis-informed products and activities, a mix of capabilities and functions supported by imagery – all informed by an appropriate strategic narrative that would provide greater insight to help shape attitudes, perceptions and even change behaviour thereby realising better operational campaign outcomes.

6
 Though, strictly speaking by the 2009 StratCom policy, NATO considers there to be five disciplines in StratCom: Public Diplomacy, civilian Public Affairs, military Public Affairs, PSYSOPS and Info Ops, which is the only known example of this configuration.

7 Military Committee Policy on NATO Information Operations 422/5, 22 Jan 15.

8 Steve Tatham refers to the battle of noun and verb: everyone seeks influence (noun), but few understand that to exert influence (verb) is a scientific process, not a creative one. The key role of influence and why understanding behaviour is key to success in future conflict is thoughtfully explained in Mackay and Tatham (2011).

Info Ops, as a military function associated with foreign audiences and foreign adversaries with a focus on decision-makers, over time failed to gain NATO-wide traction and acceptance in part because of an unclear definition and the unbounded information environment it looked to define and order.⁹ The prospect of using deception, and having access to special technical capabilities and tactics to achieve desired effects created lasting suspicion of its motives even within some quarters of the military. The construct was predicated on the idea that messages could be neatly targeted to just discrete sets of foreign audiences. But new and ubiquitous channels including social media do not discriminate between an Info Ops, PSYOPS or Public Affairs product or discrete target audiences. In modern-day conflict, there may well be local messaging but there is rarely such thing as a local audience any more. The advent of the citizen journalist and 24/7 global media operating throughout the theatre of operations put an end to that as an American PSYOPS unit found in 2005 when dead insurgents were set on fire and Taliban were taunted to leave their defensive positions to retrieve the remains.¹⁰ That the NATO doctrine is on its fifth iteration is evidence of the churn and angst over its rightful role and place.

StratCom, as a process integrator and staff coordinating function evokes similar questions as Info Ops about what it actually *does* or *produces*. By NATO Policy definition StratCom is a political-military construct. It considers all audiences domestic or foreign, friendly or malign. And it aspires to be a more significant factor in the decision-making process by putting information effect more clearly and centrally at the heart of all policies, issues *and actions*, kinetic or otherwise.

Table 4, drawing from NATO, U.S. and UK doctrine, lists the vast range of capabilities that can be associated with Info Ops and StratCom. It hints at the challenges of successfully integrating them, let alone all other actions, particularly if it is agreed that it is impossible *not* to communicate.

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9 "Info Ops is a staff function to analyse, plan, assess and integrate Information Activities to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries, potential adversaries and NAC approved audiences in support of Alliance mission objectives." (MC 422/5). The exclusion of 'foreign' and 'key leaders' from the definition and the sentence construction that puts "NAC approved" at the end rather than expressly stating it up front as the condition for approval in the first place, gave critics lots of ammunition to claim that NATO Info Ops could operate in any domain of information environment, anytime, with any audiences to create desired effects, though this was never intended by the policy. The guarantor of audience approval is the NAC.

10 An Australian TV crew filmed the event. The PSYOPS team broadcast, "Attention Taliban. You are all cowardly dogs. You allowed your fighters to be burned. This just proves you are the lady boys we always believed you to be." [http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=d02_1194675939]. The soldiers involved were charged and administratively disciplined for disposing of the remains in that manner, and for making an unauthorised broadcast. As if the challenges of outside observers was not enough, it is about to get infinitely more complicated with smart phones and small, portable helmet-mounted video cameras widely used by deployed soldiers. For instance, images of German soldiers in Afghanistan playing with skulls and bones caused considerable controversy when published in 2006. And in 2013, helmet cam footage from one soldier was used to convict a British Marine Sergeant of the murder of a gravely injured Taliban fighter.

Table 4: An overview of capabilities associated with Info Ops and StratCom

Integrators	Communication-related capabilities	Support/Contributing Capabilities (Includes NATO, U.S. and UK)	
StratCom Info Ops	Public Diplomacy Public Affairs (civilian and military) PSYOPS/ MISO (Military Information Support Operations)	Civil Military Cooperation Combat Camera Computer Network Ops Counter-deception Counter-intelligence Counter-propaganda Cyber Cyberspace Ops Electronic Warfare Electromagnetic Spectrum Ops Defence Support to Public Diplomacy Defence Diplomacy Human Intelligence	Information Assurance Information Security Intelligence Key Leader Engagement Military Deception Operational Security Operations Security Physical Attack Physical Security Presence, Posture, and Profile Space Operations Special Technical Ops Soldier Engagement Visual Imagery

At its root the aspiration seems simple – to organise and better coordinate effort and activities to achieve desired effects in the information environment. Operators and commanders wonder why the communities can’t just “get out there and get me some of those desired effects,” as one exasperated ISAF general is said to have uttered. Why, indeed?

This angst is acknowledged by Mark Laity, Chief StratCom at SHAPE. “The StratCom approach has always attracted steady controversy, especially within the information and communication communities,” he said. “In essence, it was overlaid on other information disciplines including PSYOPS, Info Ops and Public Affairs which already had issues with each other let alone a newcomer. ‘Turf fights’ have been a constant feature of the information world, partly due to the defence of institutional equities, and partly due to genuine and complex policy issues. Ethical issues about informing and influencing our domestic audiences and ensuring credibility is sustained are continuing topics of debate. But I believe there is an emerging consensus within the community for closer structural linkage though this is by no means universal and arouses strong feelings. We saw this first in ISAF and since then in other operations and especially the Ukrainian crisis with the success of the Russian disinformation campaign.”¹¹

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11 Interview.



A mentoring team on patrol with Afghan Security Forces, in Kunar province, 2009. Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

DEFINING DOCTRINE

The value of well-considered military doctrine has long had many advocates. The Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz was not the first to explain it, but in *On War* he clearly expounds on its virtues as a “guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books: it will light their way, ease their progress, train their judgement and help them to avoid pitfalls. Doctrine is meant to educate the minds of future commanders ... not to accompany them to the battlefields.”¹² Though history is replete with examples of defeat through the dogmatic application of doctrine in the face of circumstances that should have suggested alternative approaches, successful commanders such as U.S. Air Force General Curtis Lemay considered it to be “the central beliefs for waging war in order to achieve victory ... It is the building material for strategy. It is fundamental to sound judgment.”¹³

This view is reflected across NATO. In the U.S., joint forces doctrine “promotes a common perspective from which to plan, train, and conduct military operations. It represents what is taught, believed, and advocated as what is right (i.e., what works best).”¹⁴ UK doctrine advises that it is not meant to be pedantic, but “a guide to commanders and subordinates on how to think, not what to think.”¹⁵

12 Quoted from UK JDP 0-01 (5th Edition), *UK Defence Doctrine*.

13 Quoted in U.S. Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 17 Nov. 2003.

14 U.S. Joint Doctrine description.

15 Forward to Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01 (5th Edition), *UK Defence Doctrine*, November 2014, p. iii.

Not surprisingly, these concepts also inform NATO's view of doctrine being "fundamental principles by which military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative, but requires judgement in application."¹⁶ Joint doctrine assumes greater importance in an Alliance of 28 members and 41 partners that takes part in increasingly large and diverse coalition operations globally and across the spectrum of conflict. Allied joint doctrine provides forces under command with a model of how operations should be "directed, mounted, commanded, conducted, sustained and recovered. It captures that which is enduring in best practice whilst incorporating contemporary insights and how these principles are applied today and the immediate future."¹⁷ We conclude then, that doctrine matters.

DOCTRINE HIERARCHY

The expression of NATO's will and/or intent is established in policy agreed by the North Atlantic Council through political-level consensus of all member nations. This establishes authorities, assigns responsibilities, and sets boundaries or conditions with respect to what is a desirable or acceptable set of activities. Policy describes the 'why', and 'what' NATO assets are meant to do; the NATO-agreed doctrine provides the 'how'. Policies are meant to be more prescriptive than doctrine; the latter, through the principle of mission command, allows significant latitude for the commander to organise the force and prosecute the operation. While those under NATO command are meant to be guided by Alliance doctrine, nations reserve the right for their own to take precedence.¹⁸ Nations though, strive to align themselves with NATO doctrine, 'as far as practicable and sensible', and consistent with their national law and policy. Thus, the NATO StratCom Policy from September 2009 is the authoritative extant statement of intent, from which are derived the Military Committee-agreed and NAC-endorsed policies on the respective communication and information fields of Info Ops, Public Affairs and PSYOPS.¹⁹

Military keystone or capstone publications prescribe military doctrine that translates NATO policy into broad military philosophy or general principles of an enduring nature.

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16 AJP-01(D), p.1-1.

17 Ibid.

18 "The role of Multinational Joint Doctrine", *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 67, 4th quarter, 2012, National Defence University Press.

19 Each of which were subsequently amended subsequent to the NATO StratCom Policy, but nothing further or deeper than to note, superficially, that there was now such a policy.

By definition doctrine should have a long ‘shelf-life’; for instance the latest version of AJP-01(d) *Allied Joint Doctrine* dates from December 2010, and that of AJP-3(b) *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations*, from March 2011.²⁰ In addition to these, a large number of other joint NATO publications describe and set out principles, practices and procedures including considerable technical information contributing to the standardisation of effort amongst Allied nations.

Allied Command Operations HQ Directives are issued under the authority of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), and supplement NATO political or military policies. They are meant to apply to all subordinate headquarters, units and forces under the operational command or control of Allied Command Operations HQ, including the NATO Response Force and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Forces (VJTF). Importantly, the land-based NATO Rapid Deployable HQs and maritime groups are expected to adhere to NATO doctrine though as national, bi-national or multi-national assets, they have wide latitude to organise and operate based on their own policies with little sanction for not following prescriptions strictly. Allied Command Transformation, the other NATO Strategic Command, also plays an important role through its responsibility for NATO joint force training, capability requirements and doctrine development.

A nation’s *joint* doctrine trumps its national *service-specific* doctrine (army, navy, air force, marines). ‘Joint Doctrine Notes’ (JDNs) are an approach used by some nations including the U.S. and UK to promulgate substantively agreed guidance, and are used “either to promote debate, place ‘markers in the sand’ or capture and disseminate best practise.”²¹ A JDN is a “pre-doctrinal publication that presents common fundamental guidance and is part of the initiation stage of the joint doctrine development process, though it does not necessarily describe a position of consensus across joint forces.”²² As such, they are not authoritative.

The further up the doctrinal hierarchy scale, the less willing are military and nations generally to open discussions to revise it. A considerable effort is required to secure support for major changes in national service or joint doctrine. That process is more convoluted in NATO where consensus amongst 28 is the rule. The challenge of obtaining all-nation approval for change (not all have to say yes, but none can say no) is considerable, especially when related to codifying rule sets in sensitive domains.

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20 The other NATO ‘Capstone’ and ‘Keystone’ documents are AJP-2 *Allied Joint Doctrine for Intelligence, Counterintelligence & Security*; AJP-4 *Allied Joint Doctrine for Logistics*; AJP-5 *Allied Joint Doctrine for Operational Planning*; and AJP-9 *Allied Joint Doctrine for Civil-Military Co-operation*. (From AJP-01, p. 1-2). Subsequently, AJP-6 *Communication and Information Systems* was agreed.

21 UK, Developments Concepts and Doctrine Centre: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/development-concepts-and-doctrine-centre>

22 U.S. Joint Electronic Library: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/notes/doctrine_notes.htm

DOCTRINE EXAMINED FOR THIS STUDY

NATO nations can be doctrine makers or doctrine takers, the latter being just one of the perquisites of belonging to an Alliance with considerable yet widely disparate resources and capabilities. Alongside the substantial body of guidelines and procedures elucidated over the years, NATO members and partners organise, train, deploy, operate and sustain their forces in line with service-specific doctrine and/or joint doctrine. These works can be long, dense, written for functional specialists,²³ and rarely offer reason to enter the mainstream of general knowledge.

The potential for major or even minor differences of opinion amongst so many nations with such varied military backgrounds and capabilities is high. A consensus-based Alliance is able to learn and benefit from the contributions of all members large and small, but some are ‘first among equals’ and these dominate the doctrinal space. Which of these to select? NATO doctrine is agreed by all nations so that is obviously relevant. The national doctrines more frequently referenced to inform this monograph were selected based on four considerations:

- nations that provided the majority of key NATO command leadership in Afghanistan;
- nations that provided the majority of forces to the ISAF mission;
- nations that provided the majority of communication and information-related capabilities to the ISAF mission; and
- the public availability of national doctrine.

Nations that agree to lead a NATO operation are expected to generate a proportion of the key command appointments, provide sizable accompanying forces and at least some critical enablers. The nationality of the leadership and an individual commander’s background strongly determines the ‘character’ of the HQ, and how it organises the staff.²⁴ In these respects, U.S. and UK doctrine dominate.

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 23 The U.S.’s Joint Publication 4-03 *Joint Bulk Petroleum and Water Doctrine*, for instance, runs to 116 pages.

24 The NATO Response Force and the nine land-based NATO Rapid Deployable Corps HQs are based on one or a small number of framework nations that provide the majority of staff and the equipment resources for the HQ. The nationality of the senior leadership including of the functional components is heavily weighted to the major contributing nation(s), and these HQs are then augmented by additional specialist or semi-specialist staff as required when deployed, including from other NATO member and partner nations. In the case of composite NATO HQs, which was the case for the ISAF campaign from 2007-on, a major national or NATO HQ provided the bulk of the command staff with the rest of the establishment filled in by augmentees from ‘all over’, through the force generation process.

In NATO the U.S. has unmatched depth and breadth of capabilities and assets in all communication and information domains and thus a tremendous ‘competitive advantage’ in the production, trialling and evolution of doctrine. The U.S. and UK were by far the largest contributors of personnel and enablers throughout the ISAF mission, with Germany being the third largest contributor of forces for almost the entire mission (See Table 2: ISAF Force Structure, Selected Elements, 2002-2014). Four nations provided the overwhelming majority of leadership positions for the communication and information capabilities in the Corps-based and composite NATO HQs that deployed to Afghanistan – the U.S., UK, Germany and Canada.²⁵

As valuable as doctrine may be from nations other than the U.S. and UK, it is difficult to access publicly whereas those two militaries make a tremendous amount of their doctrinal material available online. As such it more easily and readily provides a foundational base for others, and often does.

DISSECTING ‘STRATCOM’

StratCom as nomenclature has three regrettable features of note:

1. *As two separate words.* ‘Strategic’ is surely one of the most abused words in government, military and business lexicon: the absence of it infers the activity is anything but that so ‘strategic’ gets tacked on to impart a greater sense of importance to the office or the activity. It is so misused and overused now as to have lost much meaning. ‘Communications’, as noted earlier, traditionally refers to military signals (radio, field telephones and equipment for units to communicate with one another in the field). Misunderstandings that confused functions also niggled the NATO Public Information community for years before the Military Committee in 2007 changed the functional title to Public Affairs;
2. *As a descriptor.* The compound title includes two elements, *strategic* and *communications*, the emphasis meant to be placed on the former (adjective) to describe the latter (noun). The natural inclination for many practitioners and leaders is to get to work on the ‘communications’ component rather than on the ‘strategic’. In 1999, the idea of the Strategic Corporal was introduced in recognition that to be effective in modern conflict soldiers lower down the chain of command are (or need to be) imbued with considerable responsibility and decision-making authority.²⁶

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25 As discussed in Chapter 4.1.

26 Charles C. Krulak (1999). "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War." *Marines Magazine*. Air University.

3. Today it would be fair to say that the actions of a Private (Bradley/Chelsea Manning: WikiLeaks) or Specialist (Lynndie England: Abu Ghraib) can have campaign-wide as well as national and international repercussions. The adjective *strategic* also implies communication that could be tactical (unit level), operational (joint command level), strategic (national or political-military leaders in the case of NATO) or even grand strategic (with political decision-making authorities and leaders): yet, the default is to label it all as strategic. The September 2015 photo of a little boy who tragically drowned off the coast of Turkey while seeking refuge from Syria with his family was first communicated by a humanitarian relief official through Twitter. This ‘tactical’ action by an individual deployed forward generated a worldwide response and was a dramatic illustration that we truly live in the age of the Strategic Tweet. If every action, image or word choice can prospectively have game-changing consequences, then what isn’t strategic?

4. *As a title.* A review of more than 500 NATO, U.S. and UK online publications does not turn up even one instance of doctrine with a title that includes the word ‘strategic’. If NATO StratCom proceeds to actual doctrine it would be the first to use the word in the title. Further, of all titles surveyed there is no other where the words reversed (communications strategy) describes a product of that function – though the term is often incorrectly used in place of Plan²⁷.

As former U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen lamented, “I know *strategic communication* as a term of reference is probably here to stay. Regrettably, it’s grown too much a part of our lexicon...”²⁸ A senior NATO staff officer who works in the field says, “I really hate the title, but nothing else comes to mind and we are quite far down this road already.”²⁹ Indeed, efforts to find a better descriptor have eluded practitioners, academics,³⁰ and NATO nations. In the NATO Force Structure at the High Readiness Corps HQs, the entity that includes StratCom functions is variously called Joint Fires and Influence; Influence and Assistance; Communication and Engagement; StratCom Support; Public Affairs Advisor; and Communications Director.

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 27 As of September 2015, doctrine available at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/doctrine/status.pdf>; http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/Active_FM.html; and, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/joint-doctrine-publication-jdp+NATO>

28 Admiral Michael Mullen (2009).

29 Personal Communication.

30 Christopher Paul (2011, p. 33) notes one reason why this is so hard is that four categories of concepts are trying to be captured in a replacement phrase (strategic, coordination, communication, and being in support of national objectives).

When each of the words is abused and the two-word adjective-noun amalgam is widely misunderstood, is it any wonder that confusion arises? Trying to change the term would mean finding some other acceptable formulation but what that could be is not patently obvious. Yet another term would serve to generate further confusion and take time away from the business of putting into practice what is meant to be done. So, NATO looks to be stuck with it.

If one was to start from scratch to fashion an ideal StratCom approach to match NATO's high aspirations in this regard, what would that look like, and how would it compare to the construct(s) in place today? Christopher Paul from RAND, a leading scholar in the field, suggests that although no definition has surfaced to garner broad acceptance, StratCom has four irreducible parts:

- informing, influencing, and persuading is important;
- doing that effectively requires clear objectives;
- coordination and de-confliction are necessary; and
- actions communicate.³¹

These all would be core to NATO's interpretation. The information environment constitutes a broad and diverse array of things, people, processes and activities. Achieving the degree of coherence required amongst all actions to defend, attack, educate, inform, influence, persuade and coerce in order to achieve desired effects is a formidable undertaking. For that to be successful StratCom would need to be informed by some additional principles to include:

- protecting (and even enhancing) organisational credibility;
- aligning actions, images, signals and words to inform planning and to support decisions;
- making senior leadership accountable for effective StratCom but identifying one senior officer or executive as the responsible agent with mindset being everybody's responsibility; and
- understanding the information environment in which NATO forces are operating, in particular the audiences whose behaviour the communication and information activities are meant to effect.

Which in turn should lead to an ability to:

- fashion effective strategic narrative(s);
- strengthen relationships with partners or like-minded communities;
- integrate lethal and non-lethal effects more closely including a determination on whether kinetic or non-kinetic effects should have primacy in the operations being planned; and
- enhance the connection between policy objectives and desired communication effect.

A robust policy would include as many or all of these attributes. How does existing policy compare with this ideal? There are dozens of propositions for a definition, but these six are taken from the latest versions of documents from or of direct interest to NATO (*italics used here for emphasis*):

NATO: NATO HQ Policy (September 2009)

“The *coordinated and appropriate use* of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims.”

NATO: Allied Command Operations HQ, ACO 95-2 (May 2012)

“In cooperation with NATO HQ, the coordinated and appropriate use of Military Public Affairs, Info Ops and PSYOPS which, *in concert with other military actions* and following NATO political guidance, advances NATO’s aims and operations.”

NATO: Draft Proposed Military Committee Policy 0628 (September 2015)

“The integration of military communication capabilities and functions with other military activities, in order *to understand and shape the [Information Environment], to inform, persuade, or influence audiences* in support of NATO aims and objectives.”

U.S.: U.S. Joint Forces Command, JP 5-0 Joint Operation Planning (August 2011)

“*Focused United States Government efforts* to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favourable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.”



A Jordanian Engagement Team, 2014. Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

U.S.: Commander’s Communication Synchronization, Joint Doctrine Note 2-13 (December 2013)

“A joint force commander’s process for coordinating and synchronizing themes, messages, images, operations, and actions to support strategic communication-related objectives and ensure the integrity and consistency of themes and messages to the lowest tactical level through the integration and synchronization of all relevant communication activities.”

UK: Joint Operations Doctrine, Joint Defence Publication 01 (November 2014)

“Advancing national interests by using all Defence means of communication to influence the attitudes and behaviours of people. It is primarily a philosophy, partly a capability and partly a process. Philosophy is the key element since it underpins aligning words, images and actions to realise influence.”

They all share similar characteristics but have quite different meaning. Definitions though, are just one means of understanding intent – the policies themselves offer other clues. In doctrine, codifying principles is often used as the means to synthesise the most important elements of intent. By ordering and comparing these side-by-side, key features and differences emerge. Table 5 and Table 6 show the ‘senior’ or most authoritative NATO policy within StratCom and Public Affairs on the far left column with the principles listed in order of appearance in the respective documents. The constituent parts of the other policies are then grouped alongside the right-hand columns for comparison. The boxes in both Tables that are highlighted show which principles in each column are described most clearly in terms of intent in each grouping. An excellent StratCom policy would thus include all of the strongest elements from all policies within that function.

Table 5: A comparison of Strategic Communication Principles

(Numbers in brackets indicate order of appearance in the publication)

NATO MILITARY COMMITTEE MC 457/2 (2011)	UK 3.45-1 Media Ops (DEC 2012)	TENETS OF PA (U.S.) JP 3-61 Public Affairs (AUG 2010)	U.S. (Information) JP3-61 Public Affairs (AUG 2010)
Tell and show the NATO story (1)		Tell the DOD Story (5)	Propaganda has no place in programs
Provide accurate information in a timely manner (2)	Truth (4) Credibility (5) Timeliness (6) Openness (8)	Tell the truth (1) Provide timely information and imagery (2) A free flow of general and military information	Make available timely and accurate info Info made fully and readily available <i>To assess and understand facts about national security and defence strategy</i>
Ensure that information provided is consistent, complementary, and coordinated (3)	Preparation (7)	Provide consistent information at all levels (4)	May require coordination with other government agencies <i>To expedite the flow of info to the public</i>
Practise appropriate operational security (4)	Force Protection/ Operations Security (1)	Practice security at the source (3)	Not classify or withhold to protect government from criticism or embarrassment <i>withheld only when disclosure adversely affect national security, threaten safety, or privacy</i>
Conduct work mindful of multinational sensitivities, and respectful of the local and regional cultural environment (5)			
	Focus on the Desired Effect (2) Effects-Based Media Operations (3)		
	Countering Disinformation (9)		

Table 6: A comparison of Public Affairs (PA) Principles*(Numbers in brackets indicate order of appearance in the publication)*

NATO STRATCOM POLICY (SEP 2009)	NATO MILITARY COMMITTEE STRATCOM POLICY 0628 (PROPOSED DRAFT)	U.S. JOINT PUB 3-61 PUBLIC AFFAIRS (AUG 2010)	UK STRATCOM JOINT DOCTRINE NOTE 1/12 (2012)
Accuracy, clarity and timeliness (1)			
Message consistency and coherence (2)	Words and actions must be aligned (3)	Unity of Effort (4) <i>Integrated and coordinated</i> Pervasive (7) <i>Every action sends a message</i>	Coherence (7) <i>Words and deeds match at all levels and with all authorities</i>
Active engagement (3) <i>Emphasis on speed and responsiveness</i>	Empowered communication at all levels (8)	Responsive (5) <i>Right audience, message, time, and place</i>	Adaptability (4) <i>Adjust say, show, do as audience understanding improves. Respond to counter-narrative</i>
Credibility (4) <i>By fostering relationships of mutual trust with media</i>	All activity is founded on NATO's values (1) Credibility is a vital asset and must be protected (2)	Credible (2) <i>Perception of truthfulness and respect</i>	Credibility (6) <i>Source and message need to be believable</i>
Effectiveness (5) <i>Defined, measured, reviewed</i>	Focused on achieving (a) desired effect(s) and outcome(s) (7)	Results-based (8) <i>Tied to desired end state</i>	Assessment (3)
Multiplicity of effort, max reach (6)	Communication is a collective and integrated effort (6)	Continuous (9) <i>Analysis, planning, execution, and assessment</i>	Empowerment (1) <i>Let many people communicate - after training. Be prepared to 'lose control to gain control'</i>
Soliciting public views (7) <i>Adapt efforts as necessary</i>		Dialogue (3) <i>Multifaceted exchange of ideas</i>	Engagement (5) <i>Two-way process with equal weight to listening/transmitting</i>
	Activity is driven by Narrative, Policy and Strategy (4)	Leaders Must Lead (1)	
	The Information Environment must be understood (5)	Understanding (6) <i>Deep comprehension of others</i>	Policy Driven (2) Clear aims and objectives, and unambiguous leadership



*Camera equipment being checked by an explosives detection dog before a press conference, 2004.
Photo: ISAF/NATO*

Overall, there is a high degree of overlap in the NATO 2009 StratCom Policy between StratCom and Public Affairs principles. The U.S., UK and draft NATO Military Committee StratCom policies in particular are markedly different with emphasis on different terms and concepts. Each shows strength in various ways, and each is illustrative of their respective differences in approach to StratCom. In NATO HQ it is definitely a process based on Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs activities (there is nothing about desired outcomes, matching policy actions with words, or using communication and information as a means to deliver effect); distinctly a process for the U.S. (most important: leaders must lead); a mindset and process for the UK; and the same for the draft NATO Military Committee StratCom policy. The latter is a considerably stronger expression of purpose than the others by a wide margin, with its focus on values and credibility as touchstones, the clearest expression of the need to understand the information environment and in establishing information effect as central to operational success, not simply as a support function that communicates decisions.

Table 7 below is a comparison of the various NATO, U.S. and UK policies and doctrine, showing the verbs that are most often used to describe intended effects of the three main communication and information-related capabilities of Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs and PSYOPS, and the two integrating functions of StratCom and Info Ops. The highlighted squares indicate, once again, which elements are notably stronger explanations of each effect as described in the policy.

Table 7: Verb Association and Information Effects in Select Communication and Information Capability Doctrine and Policy

(‘D’ indicates the effect is explicit and core; ‘A’ indicates the effect is associated in practice)^{32,33}

	Degrade/ Destroy	Coordinate	Deter	Engage	Inform	Influence	Persuade	Protect	Understand (Audience)
StratCom (NATO 2009 policy)		D		D	A				
StratCom (ACO 95-2, v. 2012)		D		D	D	D	A		D
StratCom (MC 0628 DRAFT, 2015)		D		D	D	D	D		D
Strategic Communication (U.S.) ¹		D		D	D	D	D		D
Strategic Communication (UK) ²		A		D	A	D	D		D
Info Ops (NATO: 422/5)	D	D	D	A		D	D	D	A
Public Affairs (NATO: 457/2)		D		D	D	A	A		D
PSYOPS (NATO: 402/2)			A		D	D	D		A

Again, the differences are more pronounced than the similarities. Overall, the UK Joint Doctrine Note and the draft Military Committee Policy 0628 are the strongest and clearest expressions with the latter providing a better overview, particularly of the breadth of coordination required for effective StratCom, and the need for understanding audiences given a higher priority than trying to communicate with them. Notably, the Military Committee policies on NATO Info Ops and PSYOPS are very process and systems-focused, the former in particular having remarkably little to say about the importance of audience attitude and behaviour.

The situation as of ISAF mission end in December 2014:

In NATO

- StratCom is a North Atlantic Council-approved policy, and a political-military undertaking.
- The NATO StratCom policy is very focused on coordinating Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at NATO HQ and in providing guidance to military Public Affairs. The North Atlantic Council and Secretary-General direct all NATO StratCom, the Assistant Secretary General

32 JP 5-0 *Joint Operational Planning* (Aug 2011) and Joint Doctrine Note 2-13, *Commander's Communication Synchronisation* (Dec 2013).

33 UK Joint Doctrine Note 1/12 *Strategic Communication* (Jan 2012).
http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/compendium.pdf, p. vii.

for Public Diplomacy and the Spokesperson (for press and media) are responsible for its coordination though they lack subject matter experts for Info Ops and PSYOPS.

- There is no NATO or national-level StratCom doctrine.
- In April 2015, the Military Committee tasked the Bi-Strategic Commands to draft military policy on StratCom (MC 0628). If and when agreed by the Military Committee and the North Atlantic Council this presumably would open the door for major change to Allied keystone and capstone joint doctrine, various Military Committee Policies including Public Affairs, Info Ops and PSYOPS, respective Allied Command Operations Directives, and national doctrine that aspires to follow NATO. It would or could also lead to a call to revise the 2009 NATO policy and to develop NATO military StratCom doctrine.

In the U.S.

- StratCom is an enabling activity meant to occur at the strategic level that military services support but don't do, so no joint doctrine would be necessary. That line of activity is now Commander's Communication Synchronization. A Joint Doctrine Note for this was issued in December 2013 to "provide fundamental principles, techniques, and discussion of processes to aid the commander in implementing a coordinated and coherent communication strategy," this route being decided by the doctrine development community "when the decision was made to cease development of a joint doctrine publication for communication synchronization."³⁴
- The U.S. Army did not like the term IO (Info Ops), and changed it to Inform and Influence Activities (IIA), though practitioners believe this has not found wide favour and that it may be changed back to IO; there is also consideration of a new title, Information Related Capabilities Coordinator (IRCC).³⁵
- in January 2011, Secretary of Defense Gates confirmed that PSYOPS would be changed to MISO (Military Information Support Operations); units are PSYOPS-named, but the work they do is referred to as MISO. The full-time function continues to report to Special Forces and those units staffed by part-time soldiers (Reserves) report to the U.S. Army.

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34 http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/compendium.pdf, p. vii.

35 This, from an exchange with a senior U.S. Info Ops officer with long experience in ISAF, concerned about "IO doctrinal blunders which in my opinion, further emasculates our role on staff, which I attribute to the lack of understanding by the writers, often many who have never served as a planner of these capabilities. Furthermore, the Army refused to assign or align capabilities under one guiding staff element (responsibility without authority is a recipe for disaster and ineffectiveness)."

- Public Affairs activities inform and educate audiences, mainly domestic but do not ‘influence’.³⁶
- The information-related capability communities have been very busy recently revising doctrine.³⁷

In the UK

- StratCom is a mindset, capability and a process. Its relatively modest suite of doctrine leads to a high degree of consistency in the operations and communication and information-related publications.

In other NATO nations

- It appears that no NATO member has agreed doctrine on StratCom.
- The related doctrine is not widely available publicly as a means of comparison nor is it easy to source from practitioners. This suggests a lack of it in the first place and perhaps a reliance on NATO doctrine in lieu of national doctrine.
- In Germany, PSYOPS and Info Ops have combined to form Operational Communications.
- In part due to budget constraints and to share administration costs, several nations have combined their Civil-Military Cooperation and PSYOPS units.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Table 8 summarises key points of comparison from the various policies for ease of illustrating the differences. Exchanges with dozens of practitioners who served at or in support of the ISAF mission suggests six core issues militate against better StratCom outcomes within NATO. The nature and longevity of the controversies indicates they are not inherently solvable by the communication and information communities on their own.

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36 FM 3-13, p. 2-5.

37 As of September 2015 there were 81 U.S. joint doctrine publications, of which 77 were approved with 22 under revision and 4 under development. Of the six communication and information-related doctrinal joint publications, two were revised and issued in 2014 (3-13 *Info Ops*, and 3.13.2 *MISO*), and three others are undergoing revision (3-13.3 *Operations Security*, 3-13.4 *Military Deception*, and 3-61 *Public Affairs*): 3-13.1 *Electronic Warfare* was last issued in Feb 2012. In the U.S. Army, doctrine renewal has proceeded apace, with a new 'FM 3-13 *Inform and Influence*' (a combination of Info Ops and StratCom) in Jan 2013; FM 3-53 *MISO* Jan 2013, and a revised FM 3-61 *Public Affairs* in Apr 2014. An overview of U.S. joint doctrine status is available at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/doctrine/status.pdf>

Table 8: A Comparison of Views, Interpretations and Expectations

	Main Intent or Effect (Stated, Implied or Actual)	Implications for Organisational Structure	Implications for Resources
StratCom (NATO) 2009 Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Better coord of PD and PA ● Contributes to decisions ● Communicates decisions ● “Communicating Better” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● None to limited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Small to nil
StratCom (NATO mil) ACO 95-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Includes kinetic actions ● Helps inform decisions ● “Make Existing Work More Effective” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Some, but minimal (embeds StratCom advisors within chain) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Minimal (mainly, to improve support capabilities)
StratCom (Mil Cttee) MC 0628 DRAFT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus on all actions, not just communications or kinetic ● Info effect included at start of process to inform decisions ● Informs operational planning thru greater understanding of the info environment including Target Audience Analysis ● Directorate with explicit authority to direct actions ● “Better campaign outcomes by understanding audiences and desired information effect” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Significant. Groups comms functions and capabilities for efficiency and unity of effort ● Reinforces necessity of linkages with J2 (Intel), J5 (Plans), and an Info Fusion Centre ● Embeds StratCom at various levels ● Establishes need for new capabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Modest in NATO: adds new capabilities (assessment, analysis, evaluation and re-assigns functions) ● Grouping should allow for personnel efficiencies ● Considerable number of policies and doctrine to refine ● Prospectively, significant in nations.
StratCom (U.S.) Commanders Communication Synchronization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communicates decisions ● Close say-do gap by matching actions with words (not strong emphasis on using information effect to inform actions though) ● Depends on system to identify right actions ● “Coordinated Actions Across All Lines of Effort” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● None. As a process, already structured to perform. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Small to nil. As a process, already have what is needed.
StratCom (UK) Joint Defence Note 1/12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Words and deeds match ● Provides direction and guidance to machinery of government ● Influence (including use of force and manoeuvre elements) and information are not two separate lines of operation ● “StratCom integral to inform and support policy” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Little expected; not a fundamental change but alignment of existing activity lines for policy, plans, intelligence, operations and comms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Minimal. Some capability enhancements are implied.

1. Characterisation of StratCom: Process, Mindset or Capability?

The question of whether StratCom is a process, a mindset or a capability is more than esoteric, it is the very crux of the matter and the subject of a considerable range of views within the communications community. Where one stands on this provides real insight into determinations and expectations of structure, organisation, authorities and resources. Not surprisingly, deliberations on what the best answer is for NATO are frequently encumbered by concerns over effects on individual personal power, influence and impact, as well as a legitimate difference of opinion of what would be best for the organisation including impact on external credibility. Not settling on an unambiguous answer has stymied NATO doctrinal and institutional reform.

As a 'Process'. In the NATO context, the U.S.'s opinion is a key variable. It is the nation that provides the majority of the senior military leadership in the NATO Command Structure in static and deployed HQs; has by far the most deployable communication and information-related capability; spends three times the amount on defence as all other NATO members combined; and leads on doctrine development and promulgation. Theirs is a strongly held position that StratCom is a process and that it has no place as a discrete staff element.

It is a view that has evolved over several years of acrimonious and painful debate, false starts, reviews, and many re-organisations. Following the experiences of mainly Iraq and Afghanistan there is now a generally accepted view of the role and place for all communication and information elements which the ongoing NATO StratCom debate has served to re-open. In the U.S., StratCom seemed to be finding a place as a discrete capability through both formal top-level guidance (but not doctrine), and in positions within the organisational structure. At one point as recently as five years ago, eight of the Combatant Commands were either using or transitioning to a model with a StratCom director, coordinating staff, and working groups.³⁸ Regardless, the demarcation lines between the various communication capabilities were not particularly well understood and confusion reigned until three key developments: the publication of a widely cited article by then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen; a wide-ranging assessment of defence strategic communication and information operations policy; and an expression of intent from a senior defence public affairs official.

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38 US Joint Forces Command, *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy* (Norfolk, VA: Joint Warfighting Center, June 24, 2010), p. III-6.

“Getting Back to Basics” article. In August 2009, Admiral Mullen’s views on the state of the American military public communications effort and the role and place of StratCom was laid bare in an article published in *Joint Forces Quarterly*.³⁹ The piece was widely reported in major publications online including the influential *Foreign Policy* and in international media. In it he posited several compelling insights into the particular communications challenges at the time for the American military, including that messages lacked credibility because of the difference between what was being said and done (with Abu Ghraib as an example), and that becoming better listeners was important to more effective communications. These ground truths have long been mainstays in most reports or studies about public affairs or public diplomacy and just as easily apply in a NATO context. Other points, including that the essence of good communication is “having the right intent up front and letting our actions speak for themselves,” were debatable; one interpretation being that on their own, the very righteousness of the actions would be well and truly appreciated by those affected. “If good deeds spoke for themselves, we could send the Peace Corps and disband the Marine Corps,” wryly observed Tony Corn.⁴⁰

But the real revelation was Mullen’s view on StratCom and how it fit into the U.S. military communication and information community:

“Strategic communication should be an enabling function that guides and informs our decisions and not an organisation unto itself. Rather than trying to capture all communication activity underneath it, we should use it to describe the process by which we integrate and coordinate.”

Front-End Assessment/Rosa Brooks testimony. In 2010, Secretary of Defense Gates ordered a major review of the “role and mission, definitions, management, resources, training and education” of strategic communications and information operations in the U.S. military, led by Rosa Brooks. The finding resulted in a number of decisions including changing high-level reporting relationships, doctrine, and confirming the name change from Psychological Operations to Military Information Support Operations.⁴¹ It validated Admiral Mullen’s view that StratCom would be regarded as a process – “the exceptionally hard to achieve process of communicating strategically.”⁴²

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39 Mullen (2009).

40 Quoted in Paul (2011), p. 119.

41 Secretary of Defence Memo, "Strategic Communication and Information Operations in the DoD," Jan. 25, 2011.

42 Brooks, "Ten Years On: The Evolution of Strategic Communication and Information Operations since 9/11", Testimony before the House Armed Service Sub-Committee on Evolving Threats and Capabilities, July 12, 2011.

“

It is not merely thinking about ‘how do we want to communicate this action or policy’, but rather an approach of ‘what will the actions we propose to take and the words used to explain that, communicate to those we want to influence?’: theorists as far back as Sun Tzu (“the acme of skill is to win without fighting”), knew that.

”

“The Little Memo”.

In a memorandum to the commanders of the Combatant Commands in November 2012, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs George Little complicated matters and U.S. thinking on the matter. StratCom, he wrote, was initially “viewed as a means to synchronise communication efforts across the department, however, over the last six years we learned that it actually added a layer of

staffing and planning that blurred the roles and functions of traditional staff elements and resulted in confusion and inefficiencies. As a result, this year we stood down these staff elements. We also realised that these [StratCom] plans mostly contained public affairs planning that we once again expect to come through public affairs channels.”

Everyone, it was made clear, was expected to reflect commander’s intent in all that they did. This includes the products the communication and information community produces, which by definition are meant to be synchronised: “there should be no difference between what the Public Affairs office is saying, the J5 is planning and the J3 is doing. This process can be accomplished with working groups and steering groups in concert with base planning and don’t require the creation of additional staff elements,” explained the memo. The key to successful coordination was engagement by the commander. ‘Communication synchronization’ replaced StratCom, which became a term that was to be avoided, at least within public affairs. It remained a national strategic-level function and process that the U.S. Joint Staff and Armed Services support, but don’t do. The memo was not well received outside public affairs, including by Brooks who by this time had left government but expressed the department’s view thusly: StratCom “has very little to do with traditional press and public affairs activities ... [it is] the thoughtful integration of issues of stakeholder perception and response into policymaking, planning, and operations at every level. Public affairs, information operations and traditional public diplomacy

are tools that can support and enhance strategic communication but they aren't the same as strategic communication. Mostly, though, it just misses the point, which is that strategic communication isn't about 'communications'."⁴³

Still, the pre-doctrinal handbook on Strategic Communication (2010) was replaced by a pre-doctrinal handbook on Commanders' Communication Synchronization (2013). Implementation has not been as clear-cut as intent and doctrine would suggest, and Strategic Communication offices still exist including at Combatant Commands.

That said, all senior U.S. communication and information practitioners contacted for this research expressed very similar views of StratCom as a process, perhaps best summarised from edited excerpts of exchanges with three officers, each with experience in Afghanistan and Iraq at senior rank in their respective functions.⁴⁴

U.S. Colonel, Info Ops:

"There is value in having all information-related capabilities under one authority, to ensure that messaging is consistent and supports the single overall manoeuvre plan and supporting objectives. I don't like StratCom as a term as it denotes that the U.S. Department of Defense has a role for this function... Info Ops integrates information activities to support the commander's objectives as they pertain to accomplishing a mission. This is clearly understood, but the term StratCom would suggest there is a higher authority."

U.S. Colonel, Public Affairs:

"StratCom as an organization ... at best is the dysfunctional clustering of capabilities that should not be separate from Ops planning efforts. At worst it runs the risk of completely surrendering Public Affairs legitimacy and credibility with home and friendly audiences, and the media."

U.S. Capt(N), Public Affairs:

"The true debate should be on who sits at the head of the 'process'. Adding StratCom officers at all levels of command adds bureaucracy that will slow the planning and communication cycle. The current process enables instant response of all levels of command. If everyone is working within their disciplines [Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Info Ops, PSYOPS, Civil-Military Cooperation] with their specific authorities to contribute to the same objectives, desired effects and on the same timeline, coordinated communication will occur."

.....
43 Rosa Brooks, (2012).

44 Personal Communications.

It is not possible from online sources to compare and contrast all NATO national doctrines to obtain an understanding on where nations figure themselves to be on this spectrum. In UK guidance, or more precisely, a pre-doctrinal note, StratCom is characterised as “primarily a philosophy, partly a capability and partly a process.”⁴⁵

As a ‘Mindset’. StratCom as a mindset is about inculcating a culture in which the value of communicating an action is an instinctive part of the deliberation, planning and decision-making process from the start. The stronger the mindset, the less process is needed. Staff are intuitively expected to ‘get it’ as they go about their daily work such that “all those involved in operations routinely understand that StratCom has an important role as one of the basic requirements to achieve success in missions and operations.”⁴⁶ It is not merely thinking about ‘how do we want to communicate this action or policy’, but rather an approach of ‘what will the actions we propose to take and the words used to explain that, communicate to those we want to influence?’: theorists as far back as Sun Tzu (“the acme of skill is to win without fighting”), knew that. Mindset puts the emphasis on ‘strategic’, rather than on ‘communications’.

As a ‘Capability’. Or is StratCom a capability that occupies a box in the organisation chart like Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs or PSYOPS, with staff and explicit authorities to direct communication activities? As a capability it would be a line item against which budgets and resources could be assigned. Staff functions whose purpose is to serve as an integration function are in a grey area, as Christopher Paul explains: “Info Ops is something that can be resourced, but is it really a capability? Fires is a set of capabilities, each of which can be resourced. You have to have fire support coordination and you have to resource it, but you don’t get more fires by spending more on fire support coordination. Info Ops is the same way.”⁴⁷

Discussion. The ‘process’ school of thought is popular for two reasons – it is not meant to require additional resources and thus it is ‘free’; and all are expected to follow the process. It suggests there is a set sequence of known activities that order, coordinate and synchronise the work required amongst existing capabilities. As such, the assumption is that the organisation already has the necessary resources to do what is required for the staff to coordinate it.

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45 UK Joint Doctrine Note 1-12, p. 1-3.

46 ACO 95-2, para 1-8.

47 Christopher Paul, personal communication.

‘Mindset’ would be a real force multiplier for operations if this was the case across the breadth of a HQ and force. However, if the collective experiences of recent conflicts have not been enough to motivate parties to imbue it as a natural extension of operational planning by now, then mindset doesn’t seem sufficiently robust.

Considering StratCom a ‘capability’ would seem to offer a number of advantages including the potential for resources which could be scalable, deployable and employable. However, StratCom as a capability does not find universal support including at NATO HQ. Some academics are concerned that as a stand-alone capability it would be a line item against which budgets and resources could be assigned thereby becoming something that can then be ignored or marginalised.⁴⁸ In the U.S. context StratCom as process at least puts the focus on the effort to communicate. But that effort on the whole seems to be more related to actions matching words, not necessarily that actions and policy are informed by considering the implications of the information effect. This is a critical distinction.

StratCom as a process is based on a premise that only applies in very particular circumstances: centrally directed will, a single-minded objective, fundamentally sound doctrine and extensive training of people who understand and buy into that system, and most importantly, access to huge capability across the broad spectrum of disciplines. These conditions are met in the U.S. where the challenge of coordination is to set and confirm direction and orchestrate the timing and sequencing of an enormous variety and number of moving parts. The addition of mindset to this construct so that information effect becomes central to the operational effort is what imparts strength to communication efforts of a country like Russia and an organisation like Daesh/ISIL. None of these conditions exist at NATO nor would they be expected to anytime soon, if ever.

In NATO HQs StratCom as a process is an inherently unworkable construct for at least four reasons. First, big concepts that depend on a complex web of interrelationships tend not to work well as processes in large organisations with multiple actors and interests that don’t always neatly align. Accountabilities tend to be vague, responsibilities and authorities are diffuse, there is no one ‘process owner’, and sanctions or corrective action is difficult when there is ‘not one neck to choke’. Without authorities to guide, shape and ultimately direct, the impetus comes down to an activist commander. Even that does not overcome the prospective inertia in a consensus-based organisation that is required to find a negotiated solution of the lowest common denominator to secure agreement on broad policy objectives and word choice.

.....
48 Ibid.

Second, it can take years, or decades for mindset to be inculcated and that is after widespread agreement, understanding and significant training sums have been expended. Evidence, argument and decisive leadership can certainly act as accelerants, at least for the period of that leadership as the successful influence-operation-based tour of the UK 52 Brigade in Helmand Province in 2007-08 under Major-General Andrew Mackay proved.⁴⁹

Third, the example of Info Ops as an enabling activity or staffing function within strategic-level NATO HQs is insightful: it has always been under-appreciated but it simply hasn't worked well.

Fourth, to be effective a broad range of capabilities is required in order to create effect, and these do not exist in sufficient number at NATO HQs nor in nations' militaries (discussed shortly).

In order to reconcile a variety of views without having subjected them to group discussion by the political or military leaders about what the nature of the problem is that they wish to correct, NATO settled on a policy that looks like a process, but without the capabilities or senior-level support to effect it as such.

2. The Needs of NATO HQ are not the Same as the Military HQs

There is a need to make clear and distinguish between two separate but related sets of communication activities. First are the 'inform and educate' Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs activities at NATO HQ that are directed toward NATO member and partner nations and to international audiences. Second are those 'inform, influence and persuade' activities that NATO military HQ undertake which – following political authority for operations – include actions that employ the full spectrum of communication and information capabilities such as defensive and offensive Info Ops, PSYOPS, and Public Affairs (to name a few), all within a construct that counts kinetic actions as a targeting activity.

3. Capabilities

Capabilities are the communication resources that deliver outputs: without capabilities there is nothing to coordinate. As staff functions, Info Ops and StratCom are based on an expectation that there exists a sufficient breadth and depth of trained, expeditionary capabilities to integrate. U.S. forces have that, which is a key reason why StratCom as a 'process' seems to work for them. At and within NATO HQs this is not the case, nor will it be in the foreseeable future.

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49 See Andrew Mackay, "Helmand 2007-2008: Behavioural Conflict – From General to Strategic Corporal" in *British Generals in Blair's Wars* (2013), p. 249-263.



A Dutch unit on patrol in Uruzgan, 2007. Photo credit: ISAF

The latter phases of the ISAF mission suggest that the Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs capability at NATO HQ is modestly resourced yet capable, operating at full capacity across all channels though with little other than individual augmentation available to deploy for short periods of time. This is definitely not the case in the International Military Staff, the NATO Command Structure (including the two Strategic Commands), and the NATO Force Structure (including the high readiness HQs), where successive headquarters reductions have taken their toll. The situation is more problematic in most NATO nations' militaries where it would appear there is barely enough to attend to basic national needs, a situation exacerbated by the transformation of the information environment, the complexity of operations and the range of activities all of which place additional strain on capacity. Given the dearth of trained personnel across the Alliance, NATO's default setting is to source personnel – at least in key communication positions – from the same few nations all the time.

Thus in NATO military HQs StratCom is evolving as *a mindset that is a process-based capability* because it is a forcing and fixing function to sort disjointed doctrine, weak training, and profoundly under-resourced capability in almost all NATO nations. Even today, after more than a decade of major operations including counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, peace support, peace restoration, humanitarian relief, sea operations and two major air campaigns, perhaps a half dozen nations have a professional public affairs career field,

and fewer than that can be counted on to make anything other than a solitary member available to a non-national NATO post. The most recent detailed data to illustrate this is a seven-year-old survey by Allied Command Transformation of national Public Affairs training capabilities.⁵⁰

If there is limited expeditionary capability within tangible, discrete functions like Public Affairs and PSYOPS, then there is much less for the integrating function Info Ops and considerably less within the Alliance for StratCom. It is why trained and experienced fills to the StratCom Peacetime Establishment (PE) and Crisis Establishment (CE) will be a challenge for another decade at least.

4. Firewalls.⁵¹

The integrating functions by definition are meant to effect greater synergy of effort, but constraints to that are embedded right in the doctrine. The revolution in the information environment has changed the rule sets for entry into that space: where once mainstream media ruled, now anyone with a smart phone or access to the Internet anywhere in the world is a prospective content provider. This is an enormous challenge to military operations but these developments should also lead to careful reflection about how operations staff and practitioners can benefit. Target audiences can be differentiated and communicated with more easily than ever before, but the output of communications is now regularly visible to a global audience, not just to the intended recipient. For instance, PSYOPS products in Afghanistan do make it back to national NATO member audiences.

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50 Allied Command Transformation, Survey of National PA Capabilities (Nov 2008 - Feb 2009). In that, 16 nations identified themselves as offering 'basic public affairs training with 9 noting they had Public Affairs as a career field in their military forces – though one is very hard pressed to find evidence of at least four of those nations having deployed those officers to ISAF in a Crisis Establishment post. Knowledgeable officers within Allied Command Transformation assess that in mid-2015, only the U.S., Canada and Germany have career paths, taken to mean being able to enter the field and stay in it for an entire career within trade, securing training and promotion. Others such as the UK, France, Netherlands, Poland and Romania in PSYOPS, have some senior officers who have accumulated substantial experience though this is by exception not as a regular practise. Data for this survey were not available for Albania, France, Germany and Iceland (though they do not have military forces). At the NATO School in Oberammergau, while all those attending the communication and information-related courses are meant to have been trained nationally at the individual level beforehand, "the reality is that very few have anything more than a basic knowledge of the principles and associated activities," said a senior officer at NATO very familiar with the situation. The average is for officers to have worked less than three years in the function. And, "NATO training in StratCom consists of one senior level StratCom familiarisation course offered twice a year ... while the content and quality of material and speakers is good, the course is only five days. The main course objective is to educate senior staff and commanders about StratCom but most attendees are Public Affairs, PSYOPS and Info Ops officers."

51 "Beyond coordination of efforts, messages and being informed of these activities, PA will have no role in planning or executing Info Ops, PSYOPS, or deception operations." [MC457/2 NATO Military Public Affairs Policy].

The difference is one of intent and firewalls do not recognise *intent*; they suggest a separation of effort is desirable and possible, when it is neither.

The Public Affairs/Info Ops firewall means that Public Affairs, if unaware of activities taking place by Info Ops, could inadvertently release information that puts at risk planned operational activity. ‘Not knowing’ risks information fratricide. *The boundary should be between truth and mistruth, not between functions meant to coordinate.* The separations amongst the communications functions are all based on an information environment model of a generation ago. These were established at the time for good reason, but the rationale for the separation in the first place has changed. Firewalls create divisions and stovepipes which makes coordination more difficult than it might or ought to be, and are increasingly artificial given the speed and reach of social media. Further, what had been set in place to guard credibility is now compromising credibility. The four firewalls are:

Public Affairs/PSYOPS. NATO PSYOPS conducts white, not black or grey activities: outputs are truthful and attributable to the source.⁵² Products are designed to reach audiences in theatre using channels such as TV, radio, print, loudspeakers, leaflets and billboards. The separation of Public Affairs and PSYOPS is based on the erroneous belief that PSYOPS engages in Second World War-like deception while Public Affairs provides value-neutral information to inform and educate audiences.⁵³ In various national doctrines and practice including for those countries that provided the majority of PSYOPS assets to ISAF (Germany, Poland, Romania, UK and U.S.), products and activities are based on truthful information, giving those products credibility. These products and activities specifically target in-theatre, “NAC-approved audiences.” They mean to affect perceptions, attitudes and behaviours and also serve an important inform function. It is a deliberate effort and intent to influence and persuade, not simply to inform, but is that really any different than the Secretary General or Spokesperson delivering robust declarations against the Taliban or calling on President Putin to remove Russian forces from Ukraine? The “weaponisation” of social media with its means of instant transmission to multiple audiences makes this firewall even more risky, particularly if all communication and information-related functions are not fully aware of each others’ public communications. In a NATO context this firewall hurts the ability to coordinate and take best advantage of what PSYOPS assets can offer the information campaign.

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52 NATO *Military Policy on Psychological Operations* 0402/2.

53 The Inform/Influence debate within Public Affairs continues. Purists consider information as completely value-neutral. The other perspective is that all communication is inherently an effort at some level to persuade or influence. The mere fact of the communication having taken place though, and the additional context and perspective that brings to an issue may lead to new understanding and thus have been influential.

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The separations amongst the communications functions are all based on an information environment model of a generation ago. Firewalls create divisions and stovepipes which makes coordination more difficult than it might or ought to be, and are increasingly artificial given the speed and reach of social media. Further, what had been set in place to guard credibility is now compromising credibility.

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Foreign/Domestic Audiences.

Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs deliberately target NATO troop contributing nations' domestic audiences with truthful information. PSYOPS is meant to target [indigenous, or in-theatre] “adversaries, potential adversaries and other parties approved by the NAC.”⁵⁴ Differentiating between audiences through choice of sender, message and channel is now considerably more difficult if not impossible.

Social media and the Internet are ubiquitous and do not discriminate between audiences. In ISAF, effort was made to brief ‘local’ Afghan media with messaging particular to that area expecting it would be reported only there. In fact, many were also stringers for international media outlets so reports in Dari or Pashto one day would turn up in papers or websites in NATO member countries the next day. In another example, Info Ops initiated a campaign to plant a story in local Afghan media that was designed to sow doubt and confusion about the loyalty of a particular malign group. This was reported more widely including in a Western media outlet and was picked up by ISAF’s media analysis team, the conclusions reported as a major, positive development during a morning Commander’s Update Briefing.⁵⁵ The foreign/domestic audience separation is a faulty foundation on which to base organisational structure any more.

Public Affairs/Info Ops. Strictures against a close Public Affairs/Info Ops relationship are found in NATO policy, Allied Joint Publications, Military Committee policies, Allied Command Operations directives and Allied Command Transformation training materials.⁵⁶ This firewall is in place to ensure that Public Affairs activities are not ‘tainted’ by the prospect of Info

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2009 NATO Strategic Communications Policy.

55 Personal Communication with officer who observed the exchange.

56 "Public Affairs and Information Operations are separate but related functions. There shall be no personnel overlaps during operations of staff designated for Information Operations on the one hand, and Public Affairs officers on the other." 2009 NATO Strategic Communications Policy.

Ops using Public Affairs knowingly or otherwise as a conduit to provide messages that would be untruthful, to adversaries through media to realize ‘a desired effect’ – something that causes Public Affairs considerable angst. That concern is valid. If media perceived their own objectivity was jeopardised by being used to influence external actors, Public Affairs would lose credibility and a critical communication channel would be lost to NATO.⁵⁷

Political/Military. NATO policy differentiates between civilian Public Affairs (at the Public Diplomacy Division) and military Public Affairs within the military chain of command. The NATO StratCom policy is a political-military effort and while confirming that Info Ops is a military function, also assigns responsibility to the NATO Secretary General to provide direction and guidance to all NATO StratCom, with the Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy and the NATO Spokesperson overseeing its coordination. On NATO operations there is very little that a senior officer or general, but particularly a Regional Commander or a COMISAF, might do or say that is not inherently political, and the ISAF campaign presents many examples of this tension. Lieutenant-General Hillier (ISAF V) visited Pakistan much to the consternation of his superior HQ which viewed the visit to be outside Hillier’s operational theatre and thus an inherently political act.⁵⁸ General Richards was vocal about what he believed were fundamental truths about the mission that frequently led to rebuke by higher HQs. In a contemporary example SACEUR General Breedlove (double-hatted as Commander of U.S. Forces in Europe), is faced on the one hand with demands to be forceful in his declarations about Russia over Ukraine to satisfy certain Alliance members, and by demands of other members to be less confrontational. Finding a happy ‘sweet spot’ is always going to be a challenge and a source of tension. In terms of day-to-day conduct of communications activities though, there is considerably more room and scope for each side to be more attuned to the needs, demands and challenges of the other.

Discussion. There is the potential within NATO to substantively eliminate communication firewalls and still maintain and likely improve the quality, timeliness, effectiveness and credibility of information made public. There are multiple ISAF examples of senior officers with overarching communication coordination responsibilities who successfully managed Public Affairs and Info Ops working closely together.

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57 A view based in part by the fact that almost every public affairs officer contacted for this study mentioned it as a factor they had to deal with during their tour. See Table 2: Characterisation Of And By Communication and Information Communities.

58 Interview with senior officer who was part of the command group.

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By virtue of organisational structure at the time, Brigadier Richard Nugee in ISAF IX (ARRC), Rear-Admiral (two-star) Greg Smith and Rear-Admiral (one-star) Hal Pittman were three of many who were chief communication coordinators and concurrently as circumstances warranted, spokespersons without any loss of credibility. Their knowledge of the full operational picture *enhanced* credibility in that they had knowledge of the scope of

operations and could ensure real separation of truth from deception. And they were supported by strong commanders who understood the power and necessity of effective, coordinated communications (Generals Richards, McChrystal and Petraeus respectively). This is how Commanders, responsible for *everything* within their area of responsibility (including Public Affairs and Info Ops), are able to discuss the mission or operations with media without loss of credibility.

There will be dissonance so long as functions that overtly look to influence and change behaviour co-exist with disciplines that seek only to inform. As veteran correspondent Joe Galloway observes, the military should stay away from “mixing the liars and the truth-tellers in one pot,”⁵⁹ an observation that reflects the *perception* many have of Info Ops and PSYOPS.

5. Naming conventions of Info Ops/PSYOPS.

What’s in a Name? Well, a lot, actually. NATO nations would hardly call its efforts to inform or even influence to be propaganda which is, after all, what its adversaries do. Names are loaded with meaning. There is a world of difference between what the Pashto interpretation of Taliban means (“student of Islam”), and the Western concept of it. Naming conventions and reporting relationships within the communication and information functions have become public issues on a number of occasions causing media eruptions and leading to investigations.

Interestingly, the practitioners most knowledgeable about target audience analysis, and the role and place of communications to change attitudes, perceptions and influence behaviours, do not fully appreciate how their own names are perceived and how this affects their credibility and standing with NATO publics, media and populations in theatre. Name change discussions have take place in recent NATO working groups, but consensus about what to do, if anything, has so far eluded the 28 nations. Naming conventions *prima facie* appear to be a challenge as the following examples will attest.

Office of Strategic Influence. On February 19, 2002, *The New York Times* reported on the establishment four months earlier of an Office of Strategic Influence, part of the Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict group of Info Ops in the Joint Staff at the American Department of Defense. The group was established, “to roll up all the instruments ... to influence foreign audiences.”⁶⁰ The story quoted an official with the program, a former PSYOPS colonel who proposed to plant stories in foreign media outlets through third parties without attributing the source. The office was going to undertake activities “from the blackest of black programs to the whitest of white” according to another named official. “Everybody understands using information operations to go after non-friendlies,” he was quoted. Apparently not. In subsequent days, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was compelled to repeatedly confirm that defence officials would only release truthful information to domestic and international audiences, and fielded numerous questions about the issue at media opportunities that week including on *Meet the Press*. The unit was shut down a week later; more accurately, the name was changed. Later that year Rumsfeld recounted, “And then there was the Office of Strategic Influence. [...] I went down that next day and said fine, if you want to savage this thing fine I’ll give you the corpse. There’s the name. You can have the name, but I’m gonna keep doing every single thing that needs to be done and I have.”⁶¹

Organisational Change at ISAF HQ. In November 2008, Jon Hemming from Reuters newswire reported that COMISAF General McKiernan had ordered “a merger of the office that releases news with ‘Psy Ops,’ which deals with propaganda, a move that goes against the alliance’s policy.”⁶² The story appeared in print two days before the change was to take place, suggesting that the reporter was tipped off by disaffected parties within NATO.

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60 <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/19/world/nation-challenged-hearts-minds-pentagon-readies-efforts-sway-sentiment-abroad.html>

61 <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/2002/11/dod111802.html>

62 See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/11/29/us-afghan-nato-idUSTRE4AS0ZV20081129>

If allowed, the organisational change would “totally undermine the credibility of the information released to the press and the public,” according to one of three officials claimed to have spoken with the reporter. Four days later the re-organisation was put on hold, at least temporarily until a satisfactory work-around could be found.

Use of PSYOPS Staff Allegedly to ‘Influence the Influencers’. In February 2011, *Rolling Stone* magazine published an article (“Another Runaway General”) by Michael Hastings, who reported that Lieutenant-General William Caldwell, the commander of NATO forces training Afghans (subsequently the last COMISAF and on transition, the first Resolute Support Commander) ordered the unit’s PSYOPS staff to conduct detailed research on visiting U.S. congressmen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, think-tank analysts and other foreign government officials.⁶³ Among a host of spurious concerns in the article, the officer is quoted as saying his team was tasked with “illegally providing themes and messages to influence the people and leadership of the United States.” The piece received wide pick-up and led General Petraeus to order an investigation, which found the allegations to be untrue.

Discussion. The examples suggest there already exists considerable concern, misunderstanding and consternation amongst elected and senior officials about the type of work associated with Info Ops and PSYOPS. This is not likely to be dispelled soon, but the names don’t help. Several NATO nations in addition to Germany and the U.S. have evolved to different naming conventions including France (Military Influence Operations), Belgium (Operational Communication), the Netherlands (Civil-Military Interaction), as has the UN (Local Communication).⁶⁴ As Rosa Brooks has written, “It’s less about what we have to say than it is about considering what others hear and understand.”⁶⁵ That the names often invoke perceptions not consistent with NATO doctrine and practice suggests a fundamental problem.

6. The Role and Place of Info Ops in NATO, Given StratCom.

At issue is whether there is room for two enabling functions meant to coordinate the work of the same capabilities within the information environment. The place of Info Ops in StratCom needs to be clarified as the definitions and many coordinating tasks are similar, at least from the context of audiences in theatre. Until this is resolved the discontinuity will continue to hurt efforts including within other NATO nations to follow the emergent NATO StratCom model.

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63 <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/another-runaway-general-army-deploys-psy-ops-on-u-s-senators-20110223>

64 Thanks to Thomas Nissen, Royal Danish Defence College, for this explanation.

65 Brooks (2011).

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It's less about what we have to say than it is about considering what others hear and understand.

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There are many associated support capabilities coordinated by Info Ops including those for attack and defence activities and which are highly technical, demanding close oversight and direct coordination by the Operations staff. There also is a legitimate military requirement for deception which is also meant to be coordinated by Info Ops. This suggests a division of responsibility whereby StratCom has responsibility over the capabilities that

most directly relate to truthful and attributable public and internal information including Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, PSYOPS, Imagery, Key Leader Engagement and possibly Civil-Military Cooperation. This would free up Info Ops, but with a new name, to focus on all the other functions of a technical nature while being responsive to StratCom.

SUMMARY

The absence of doctrine or good overarching policy in a large, diverse organisation like NATO is an invitation for information fratricide. Conflicting messages from 28 member nations confuse target audiences and undermine strategy, so process is important. A strong NATO StratCom policy and/or Military Committee policy is a good start. However, the key to making them work well is mindset, and all good intentions in the world cannot make up for lack of capability. Table 9 illustrates the place and effect for each.

Table 9: The Balance and Value of Mindset, Capability and Process
(Worst- to best-case scenario)

PROCESS	MINDSET	CAPABILITY	RESULT
X	X	X	This was the situation of the NATO strategic-level HQs (NATO HQ, Allied Command Operations, Allied Command Transformation) in summer 2006 at the start of fighting in southern Afghanistan. An organisation in this situation should hope that the adversary has little to no credibility at home and abroad and limited communication capability, or that the operation is remote or of little global media interest. Otherwise, losing the communication effort is a certainty.
√	X	X	Senior leaders are guaranteed to be frustrated at outcomes and practitioners. Tendency is to blame poor results on a lack of a coherent and consistent strategic narrative.
X	X	√	Lots of product, even some of quality, but effort is not timely or supported at Command or staff level.
√	X	√	Campaign is at behest of quality of practitioners. Need to hope that adversary has a weaker communication campaign.
X	√	X	Senior leaders at least are engaged and visible; this is likely to lead to resources over time. Success is possible.
√	√	X	Good intentions, well said. Generates exhaustion all around as pressure is put on limited production assets, straining capability. At least, work-arounds are possible due to the commitment of senior leadership.
X	√	√	Leaves campaign open to information fratricide. Still, on any given day, lots of good capability with an engaged command team is better than lots of process with less capability.
√	√	√	A fighting chance in today's information environment.

Mindset is the *primus inter pares* (first among equals). Process without capability is hollow. Capability is needed to make process effective. Without process or mindset, information fratricide will follow. An ideal situation therefore is mindset that is a process-based capability. Then, once that is resolved, all there that remains is to get the campaign strategy and supporting policies right...

Table 10: A Confusion of Doctrine: An Overview Comparing StratCom and Related Key Doctrine

TITLE/DATE	OWNER	DEFINITION, PURPOSE, STATED INTENT	AMPLIFYING DETAIL	OBSERVATIONS
<p>StratCom Policy PO(2009)0141, 29 Sep 2009</p>	<p>NATO HQ</p>	<p>“The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities - Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate - in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims.” [4-1]</p>	<p>“NAC and Secretary General direct all NATO Strategic Communications, civilian and military.” “Assistant Secretary General Public Diplomacy Division responsible for overall coordination of NATO StratCom, civilian and military (excepting press and media who report to SG [Secretary-General]). Contributing capabilities: PD; PA; Military PA; Info Ops; PSYOPS</p>	<p>Differentiates mil and civ PA activities ‘Actions’ are neither explicit nor implied: limited to communications effort Focus is on informing and engaging public opinion by explaining “evolving roles, objectives and missions.” Principles: Accuracy/clarity/timeliness Consistency/coherence Active engagement Ensuring credibility Effectiveness Multiplicity of effort and max reach Solicit public views</p>
<p>MC 0628 NATO Military Policy on Strategic Communications (Working Draft)</p>	<p>NATO Military Committee</p>	<p>“The integration of military communication capabilities and functions with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the IIE [information environment], to inform, persuade, or influence audiences in support of NATO aims and objectives.”</p>	<p>StratCom is recognised “as both a communications capability and as a coordinating function” . Change from advisory/coord function to “holding the commander’s delegated authority to ensure coherence of NATO actions and words.”</p>	<p>Principles: All activity founded on NATO’s values Credibility is vital asset Words and actions must be aligned Narrative, Policy, Strategy drives activity Info Environment must be understood Comms is collective and integrated effort Focused on desired effect and outcome Empowered communication at all levels</p>

STRATCOM

TITLE/DATE	OWNER	DEFINITION, PURPOSE, STATED INTENT	AMPLIFYING DETAIL	OBSERVATIONS
StratCom Directive 95-2 21 May 2012	NATO ACO HQ	<p>“In cooperation with NATO HQ, the coordinated and appropriate use of Military PA, Info Ops and PSYOPS which, in concert with other military actions and following NATO political guidance, advances NATO’s aims and operations.”[1-4]</p> <p>“[C]oordinating and maintaining understanding and support for NATO/ Allied Command Operations and its operations, particularly among NATO nations, partners, and with relevant international and local actors within our areas of interest and operations.” [1-5]</p> <p>“In addition, StratCom coordinates communication capabilities and synchronises them with lethal effects in order to influence the opinions and behaviour of selected audiences...” [1-5]</p>	<p>Direct access to the Commander</p> <p>Mindset: “...ensuring information and communication aspects are placed at the heart of all levels of policy, planning and implementation, and are a fully integrated part of the overall effort...” [1-6]</p> <p>Contributing capabilities: PA; Info Ops; PSYOPS</p> <p>CIMIC and KLE explicitly highlighted</p>	<p>Coordination of military actions including lethal actions, is explicit.</p> <p>‘Influence’ is explicit</p> <p>Principles: not expressly named though consistency of themes and messages is vital to maintaining credibility.</p> <p>Envisions an active role for StratCom in program execution: to “coordinate [info discipline] outputs and for overseeing their execution”</p>
White House National Framework for Strategic Communication March 2010	U.S. Government	<p>“The synchronization of our words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals.”</p> <p>“Advance U.S. Government interests, policies, and objectives...”</p>	<p>Mindset: “foster a ‘culture of communication’ that recognises and incentivises the importance of identifying, evaluating, and coordinating the communicative value of actions as a proactive and organic part of planning and decision making at all levels.”</p> <p>Key elements of defence-related capabilities include but are not limited to: PA; Info Ops; PSYOPS; Defence Support to PD; Civil Affairs</p>	<p>The Framework is “not creating or advocating for the creation of new terms, concepts, organisations, or capabilities.”</p> <p>Without an ‘s’</p>

TITLE/DATE	OWNER	DEFINITION, PURPOSE, STATED INTENT	AMPLIFYING DETAIL	OBSERVATIONS
JP 5-0 Joint Operation Planning August 2011	U.S. Joint Forces Command	“Focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favourable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronised with the actions of all instruments of national power.” [xiv]	The primary military capabilities that contribute to StratCom include: PA; Info Ops; Defence Support to PD	StratCom reserved for strategic level: “Commander’s Communication Synchronization” replaces StratCom at the operational level. Principles: Credible, Dialogue, Unity of Effort, Responsive, Understanding, Pervasive, Results-Based, Continuous
Joint Doctrine Note 2-13 Commander’s Communication Synchronization 16 Dec 2013 “pre-doctrinal”	U.S. Joint Staff	Communication Synchronization: “A joint force commander’s process for coordinating and synchronising themes, messages, images, operations, and actions to support strategic communication-related objectives and ensure the integrity and consistency of themes and messages to the lowest tactical level through the integration and synchronization of all relevant communication activities.”	Communication and Information-related capabilities: Civil-Military Operations Combat Camera Cyberspace Operations Defence Support to PD Engagement (KLE, Soldier Engagement) Info Ops MISO PA Visual Imagery	The term ‘Communication Synchronization’ replaced ‘Strategic Communication’ in 2012. Trust and credibility are a function of matching operations, actions, images and words Does not identify principles Public Affairs educates and informs but does not persuade : Educate (PA, KLE, CMO, CO, MISO) Inform (PA, CMO, CO, MISO) Influence (IO, KLE, CMO, CO, MISO, Destruction, MILDEC, EW) Persuade (IO, KLE, CMO, CO, MISO)
Joint Operations Doctrine (JDP 01) November 2014 UK Joint Doctrine Note 1-12: Strategic Communication January 2012	UK Ministry of Defence	“Advancing national interests by using all Defence means of communication to influence the attitudes and behaviours of people. It is primarily a philosophy, partly a capability and partly a process. Philosophy is the key element since it underpins aligning words, images and actions to realise influence.” [p.20] Purpose: “to advance the national interest and to support national policies and objectives.” [106] ‘Communication’ in the overarching National Security Council draft as “words, images and public actions.”	Mindset: “What does this [words, images, actions] communicate to those we wish to influence?” The overarching National Security Council draft includes the following, with Defence making “a contribution to all these activities.” Contributing capabilities: Defence diplomacy Diplomatic campaigning Info Ops Public Affairs Public Information Soft power activities	‘Influence’ is explicit Importance of ‘actions’ is explicit ‘All means available’ is explicit Principles: Empowerment, Policy Driven, Assessment, Adaptability, Engagement, Credibility, Coherence Without an ‘s’

TITLE/DATE	OWNER	DEFINITION, PURPOSE, STATED INTENT	AMPLIFYING DETAIL	OBSERVATIONS
<p>INFO OPS 422/5 NATO Military Policy for Information Operations 22 Jan 2015</p>	<p>NATO Military Committee</p>	<p>“A staff function to analyse, plan, assess and integrate Information Activities to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries, potential adversaries and other NAC-approved parties in support of Alliance mission objectives.”[4] Further, to “reinforce or affect changes in behaviour, influence the will, shape perceptions, improve or degrade capabilities, and affect information and information systems.”</p>	<p>Planned by: J5 Plans Executed by: J3 Ops Reference to explicit capabilities is now removed, but policy refers to Counter propaganda (“led and coordinated by”), and Intelligence and targeting “NATO Info Ops supports StratCom by planning to achieve effects and coordinating Information Activities on the operational and tactical levels...”</p>	<p>Scale and scope of effort and intent is opaque due to a number of definitions within definitions. Is meant to be, but is not explicitly bounded by the definition to foreign audiences thus creating concern over scope of effort. Influence and actions including task-specific fires and manoeuvre are explicit. Taken together, this is virtually the same remit as StratCom.</p>
<p>422/5 NATO Military Policy for Information Operations 22 Jan 2015 (continued)</p>		<p>Information Activities: “actions designed to affect information and/or information systems. They can be performed by any actor and include protection measures.” [2] Information Environment: “comprises the information itself, the individuals, organisations and systems that receive, process and convey the information, and the cognitive, virtual and physical space in which this occurs.” [2]</p>		<p>Previously, [Allied Joint Publication for IO 3.10, 23 Nov 2009]: “NAC approved parties may include adversaries, potential adversaries, decision makers, cultural groups, elements of the international community and others who may be informed by Alliance information activities.” “Decision-maker is used in its broadest sense... They include political and other leaders and military commanders, influential individuals, military personnel, armed factions and specific population groups (e.g. ethnic, cultural, religious and political).”</p>

TITLE/DATE	OWNER	DEFINITION, PURPOSE, STATED INTENT	AMPLIFYING DETAIL	OBSERVATIONS
<p>AJP-03(B) Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations March 2011</p> <p>[Allied Joint Publication for IO 3.10 (23 Nov 2009), is no longer listed as current on the NATO Web].</p>	<p>NATO</p>	<p>“Info Ops is a military function to provide advice and coordination of military information activities in order to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries, potential adversaries and other NAC approved parties” [0164].</p> <p>Influence, information protection and counter-command activities are three inter-related activity areas. They “can make use of all or any capability or activity that can exert influence, affect understanding or have a counter-command effect; the extent is only limited by imagination, availability, policy and legal constraints.” [0168].</p>	<p>Contributing Capabilities: Computer Network Operations Deception Electronic Warfare Information Security Key Leader Engagement Operations Security Physical Destruction Presence, Posture and Profile Psychological Operations [0168]</p> <p>PA (Separate but related)</p>	<p>‘Military’ function was changed to ‘staff function’ in Military Committee policy.</p>
<p>Joint Pub 3-13 Information Operations 20 Nov 2014</p>	<p>U.S. Joint Staff</p>	<p>“The integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.”</p>	<p>Functional Authorities: Joint Staff (Info Ops, Mil Dec, Op Sec) Special Operations Command (MISO) Cyber Command (CNO)</p> <p>Military capabilities that contribute to IO: CIMIC, Cyberspace Ops (CO), EW, Info Assurance, Intel, KLE, Mil Dec, MISO, Op Sec, PA, Space Ops, StratCom</p> <p>Still, this “does not constitute a comprehensive list of all possible capabilities that can contribute to IO.”</p>	<p>Replaced previous version's focus on five core capabilities (EW, CNO, MISO, Mil Dec, Op Sec)</p> <p>Supporting doctrine has all been recently revised: JP3-13.1 EAW, Feb 2012 JP3-13.2 MISO, Nov 2014 JP3-13.3 Op Sec, Jan 2012 JP3.13.4 Mil Dec, Jan 2012</p>

TITLE/DATE	OWNER	DEFINITION, PURPOSE, STATED INTENT	AMPLIFYING DETAIL	OBSERVATIONS
Field Manual (FM) 3-13 Inform and Influence Activities (IIA) Jan 2013	U.S. Army	<p>“Inform and influence activities is the integration of designated information-related capabilities in order to synchronize themes, messages, and actions with operations to inform United States and global audiences, influence foreign audiences, and affect adversary and enemy decision making.”</p> <p>“IIA focus on all audiences within the info environment, including domestic, foreign friendly and neutral, adversary and enemy.”</p> <p>“Joint IO doctrine focuses on adversaries and potential adversaries only.”</p>	<p>G-7 (S-7) (except MILDEC)</p> <p>Designated info-related capabilities include but not limited to: PA, MISO, Combat Camera, Soldier and leader engagement, CIMIC, Civil and cultural considerations (Human Terrain Teams), Op Sec, Mil Dec</p> <p>Other capabilities not solely designed to inform or influence but that can support: Cyber (EW, Cyberspace Ops, Electromagnetic spectrum management operations); Physical Attack; Physical Security; Presence, Posture, and Profile; Special Technical Operations</p>	
PUBLIC AFFAIRS				
Mil Policy on PA MC457/2 February 2011	NATO Military Committee	<p>“Promote NATO’s military aims and objectives to audiences in order to enhance awareness and understanding of military aspects of the Alliance.”</p> <p>Three functions: external comms (media, stakeholders), internal comms, and community relations</p>	Direct to Commander	Coordinate with broader StratCom effort, and with Info Ops, though “PA will have no role in planning or executing Info Ops, PSYOPS, or deception operations.”
ACO Public Affairs Directive 09/5-001 4 June 2013	NATO ACO HQ	<p>Promote NATO’s military aims and objectives to audiences in order to enhance awareness and understanding of military aspects of the Alliance.</p>	Direct to Commander	<p>“truthful, accurate and timely communication”</p> <p>“two main [effects] are to enhance public understanding and maintain Alliance credibility in the public eye” (emphasis in original)</p>
Joint Pub 3-61 Public Affairs August 2010	US Joint Staff	<p>“Those public information, command information, and community engagement activities directed toward both the external and internal publics with interest in the Department of Defense.”</p>	Coordinate with StratCom, Visual Imagery, Defence Support to PD	A value- and results-neutral objective

TITLE/DATE	OWNER	DEFINITION, PURPOSE, STATED INTENT	AMPLIFYING DETAIL	OBSERVATIONS
Field Manual (FM) 3-61 Public Affairs Operations April 2014	U.S. Army	<p>“To inform internal and external publics and fulfil the Army’s obligation to keep the American people and the Army informed.”</p> <p>Broadly categorised into three functions: public information, command information, and community engagement.</p>		<p>Activities are value-neutral: public affairs professionals are responsible for “analysing information in the media and contributing to the information environment through the release of accurate information and imagery.” In turn, this may have “positive or negative effects in the information environment”. [1-4.]</p>
3-45.1 Joint Media Ops 21 Dec 2012	UK Joint Staff	<p>“That line of activity developed to ensure timely, accurate and effective provision [through the media] of Public Information (P Info) and implementation of Public Relations (PR) policy within the operational environment whilst maintaining Operations Security.” [7]</p>		<p>The Info Strategy is defined as: “Information activity coordinated across Government that influences decisions, opinions and outcomes in order to support the National Strategic Aim and associated policy objectives.”</p>
Psychological Operations				
MC402/2 NATO MilPol on PsyOps 24 Sep 2012	NATO Mil Cttee	<p>“Planned activities using methods of communication and other means directed at approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives.”</p> <p>“Additionally, PSYOPS can mitigate the effective use of hostile propaganda against friendly forces, local civilian audiences and other audiences of importance to NATO.”</p>	<p>Through Info Ops Planned under J5 Plans, executed through J3 Ops.</p>	<p>“The highest NATO representative responsible for Info Activities could include Deputy Chief of Staff Comms, Chief Info Ops, COM CJPOTF, etc.; however ... PAO staff officers will not be used for this function”.</p> <p>“In order to preserve Alliance and PSYOPS credibility, PSYOPS are based on true and factual information, and are generally attributed to NATO or a concurring partner nation or organisation.”</p>
AJP 3-10.1 (Edition B) Allied Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations Sep 2014	NATO	<p>“Planned psychological operations that pursue objectives to gain the support and cooperation of supportive and neutral audiences and to reduce the will and the capacity of hostile or potentially hostile audiences to commit aggressive action, and contribute to crisis management and deterrence in support of diplomatic actions.”</p>		

LEGEND:

CIMIC: Civil-Military Cooperation
CNO: Computer Network Operations
CO: Cyberspace Ops
Defence Support to PD: Defence Support to Public Diplomacy
EW: Electronic Warfare (degrade, neutralise, destroy enemy combat capability including Elec Attack, Elec Protect, Elect Warfare)
Humint: Human Intelligence
Mil Dec: Military Deception
MISO: Military Information Support Operations
Op Sec: Operational Security
OPSEC: Operations Security
PPP: Presence, Posture, Profile

Table 11: Key communication and information-related capabilities and activities comparison

	PURPOSE	AUDIENCE(S)	FUNCTION	MAIN EFFECTS	DIMENSION	MAIN SUPPORT CAPABILITIES
NATO HQ StratCom	Educate/inform Gain/maintain public support Deter adversaries	International Domestic Adversary	Coordinate	Inform Deter	Cognitive Information	Committee on PD StratCom Cell
NATO HQ Public Diplomacy/ NATO HQ Public Affairs	Educate/inform Gain/maintain public support Deter adversaries	International Domestic	Communicate timely, truthful, unclassified information	Educate Inform Deter	Cognitive, Information	SecGen + Deputy CMC + SACEUR National leaders Press and Media Engagements Branch NATO TV, NATO Web
NATO Military StratCom (DRAFT Proposed)	Info effect at heart of planning and decision-making	International Domestic Adversary	Ensure coherence	Understand Inform Persuade Influence	Physical Cognitive Information	All Info-related capabilities All other mil actions
Allied Command Operations HQ StratCom	Synchronised operations: actions, words, and images	All, especially key publics, stakeholders, and individuals	Synchronise Integrate	Inform Influence Deter	Physical Cognitive Information	SACEUR Military Public Affairs Info Ops PSYOPS
Commander's Communication Synchronization (U.S. Joint) Inform & Influence (U.S. Army)	Synchronised operations: actions, words, and images	All, especially key publics, stakeholders, and individuals	Synchronise Integrate	Inform Influence	Physical Cognitive Information	Info-related capabilities & activities Visual Imagery Combat camera Engagement (KLE, Soldier) Def Support to PD Military Deception
StratCom (UK)	Synchronised operations: actions, words, and images	All, especially key publics, stakeholders, and individuals	Synchronise Integrate	Inform Influence	Physical Cognitive Information	All Communications capabilities and activities
NATO Info Ops	Affect decision-making	Foreign: Adversary and potential adversary	Integrate	Influence Disrupt Corrupt Defend	Physical Cognitive Information	All info-related capabilities as required including Electronic Warfare
NATO Military Public Affairs	Educate/inform Organisational credibility Deter adversaries	International Domestic	Communicate timely, truthful, unclassified information	Inform Influence (implied) Deter	Cognitive Information	Chairman Mil Cttee SACEUR, SAC(T) Field Commanders Deployed personnel
NATO PSYOPS	Influence emotions, motives, thinking, and change behaviour	Foreign: governments, organisations, groups, individuals, adversaries	Convey selected information to foreign audiences incl adversaries	Influence	Physical Cognitive Information	Combined Joint PSYOPS Task Force Mil Info Support Teams
MISO: Mil Info Support Operations (U.S.)						
NATO Key Leader Engagement	Educate, influence, and persuade	Key leaders: Foreign regional Foreign local	Gain support	Influence	Cognitive	Joint force leaders
Soldier Engagement (U.S.)						All deployed personnel

Dimensions: NATO, U.S and UK doctrine prescribe three dimensions in the information environment, and are generally taken to refer to: physical (processes), cognitive (people), information or virtual in UK (systems).

CHAPTER 6: THE EVOLUTION OF NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS



Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

“I am prepared to discuss the Comprehensive Approach, so long as we just talk about security.”
Senior Ambassador at NAC meeting, 2007¹

OVERVIEW

An internecine feud amongst communication and information-related capabilities has bedevilled StratCom since it emerged as a concept about a decade ago. In the main, this remains unresolved at NATO HQ and in many Alliance nations. Factions have established secure beachheads and have hunkered down, though an uneasy calm has now settled since Russia’s incursion into Ukraine showcased how the overt use of (dis)information is a key weapon in the arsenal of instruments of national power.

The discordant situation is a result of many factors including a weak NATO StratCom policy and reticence to use the authorities vested in it; the challenge of observing demonstrable and measurable outcomes that can be attributed to StratCom (compared to Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs or PSYOPS); the abundance of policy guidelines and informative instruments but the absence of clear, integrated military doctrine; a lack of expeditionary communication-related capability in NATO nations; and, the outcome of leaving practitioners to try on their own to resolve legitimate differences within the functional components borne of the politics of a consensus-based Alliance and many different national historical experiences. As set out in the previous chapter though, a key issue is the absence of agreement as to whether StratCom is a process, mindset or capability which in turn has significant implications for structure, authorities and resources.

NATO, armed with a modest baseline capacity and capability at NATO HQ Brussels and Allied Command Headquarters in Mons, is now in a considerably better position to prosecute communication operations today than it was a decade ago at the start of the engagement in Afghanistan. Incremental improvements aggregated over time mean it has improved in absolute terms: in relative terms though, has it kept pace with changes in the information environment? Arguably not, although certain trend lines since the 2014 Wales Summit are positive. “It is very different now than even just a few years ago. It is more political, more unpredictable, more complex, and more risky,” said Oana Lungescu, the NATO Spokesperson. “These are uncharted waters. There is a lot of sophisticated propaganda today, with the systematic use of social media including trolls, and the significant involvement of analysts and opinion formers.

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1 Recounted in an interview with a senior military officer from a national delegation at the meeting in question.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with Spokesperson Oana Lungescu and Deputy Spokesperson Carmen Romero.

Photo: NATO/ISAF

The requirement to provide information to the public directly and for the media is also different in terms of speed and scale – in the past couple of years alone, we’ve witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of media queries we receive, all of which need to be dealt with in a timely fashion.”²

Over its history the Alliance has shown a remarkable ability to adapt and, eventually, get to where it needs to be. From the perspective of prosecuting operation-specific communication campaigns, this seems to be the case with the International Staff at NATO HQ and at the two bi-Strategic Commands: the real challenge is how to go about strategic communications during periods defined by “everything else”, that is, political-military developments that should call for a NATO response but are not governed by an Operational Plan. The picture arguably is less satisfactory at the Military Committee and in national militaries. Aside from the U.S., UK and Germany (and sometimes Canada, the Netherlands and perhaps Poland and Romania), it’s not entirely clear that many national militaries *are even trying*.

As addressed in the previous chapter, one leading scholar in the field explains that whatever one wishes to call it or however it may be organised, StratCom has four irreducible parts:

- informing, influencing, and persuading is important;
- doing that effectively requires clear objectives;
- coordination and de-confliction are necessary; and,
- actions communicate.³

2 Interview.

3 Paul (2011), p. 17.

And to be effective, it is proposed here that StratCom principles should include:

- protecting (and even enhancing) organisational credibility;
- aligning actions, images, signals and words to inform planning and to support decisions;
- making senior leadership accountable for effective StratCom but identifying one senior officer or executive as the responsible agent, with mindset being everybody's responsibility; and,
- understanding the information environment in which NATO forces are operating, in particular the audiences whose behaviour the information activities are meant to affect.

Which in turn should lead to an ability to:

- fashion effective strategic narrative(s);
- strengthen relationships with partners or like-minded communities;
- integrate lethal and non-lethal effects more closely, including a determination on whether kinetic or non-kinetic effects should have primacy in the operations being planned; and
- enhance the connection between policy objectives and desired information effect.

Our start point is to consider to what extent this ideal general model is satisfied by existing NATO HQ policy and practice, and if not, then why not. To do so, this chapter will explore at what point in time StratCom could reasonably be said to exist within NATO, and in what form and configuration. What were the catalysts for its development and to what extent was this driven by ISAF? Could StratCom's evolution be said to have been a top-down effort from NATO to Allied Command Operations and ISAF, or was it a bottom-up effort from subordinate military HQs? In the absence of a formal NATO StratCom policy until the Fall of 2009, did anyone at ISAF notice? Further, once the policy was in hand, did it make the job of communicating the mission at NATO HQ or by NATO military authorities any easier, or any more effective?

The chapter provides an overview of how StratCom developed and the various contributing factors to it leading up to 2007, when the first effort at change was made, through to the 2009 NATO StratCom policy that remains in force. This is followed by a detailed discussion about the major related policy developments at NATO HQ that have informed the current situation.

The policy is not purpose-made *for* ISAF but its origins certainly were a result of it. Understanding how StratCom as a concept has evolved and taking stock thus provides insight into how ‘fit for purpose’ the relevant policies and instructions may be for the range of operations the Alliance may be called upon to undertake. Deriving findings of this sort should be of interest particularly if it is the case that ISAF was not a once-in-a-lifetime mission.

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT (BLUF)

- Though not known as StratCom at the time, efforts to better organise communication and information-related capabilities to achieve desired effects proceeded in fits and starts at ISAF HQ as early as in 2004.
- Fit for purpose doctrine matters: the NATO StratCom 2009 policy is not fit for purpose. The policy assigns responsibility to the North Atlantic Council and the Secretary General to *direct* all civilian and military NATO StratCom activities, and to the Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy and the NATO Spokesperson for its *overall coordination*. This is an exceptionally broad remit. It conflates two quite separate but related sets of communications requirements, both of which need to be underpinned by North Atlantic Council decisions: the inform/educate element of communicating to member nations, partners and like-minded countries; and in-theatre inform/influence/persuade military-led operations including targeting with lethal and non-lethal means. There is considerable difference between Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs activities driven by the top political-military HQ, and the strategic, operational and tactical activities undertaken on deployed operations for impact.
- Notwithstanding the duration, intensity and the human and financial cost of the war, the ISAF mission was a forcing function for only incremental change in political and military policy, the organisation of effort, and Alliance communications. The Russian incursion into Ukraine has been the catalyst for reform initiatives on all these fronts.
- The period was marked by a lack of senior political and military engagement to resolve an intractable situation within the NATO communications community that, in spite of best efforts by dedicated staff, could not be solved on its own.

Though the North Atlantic Council and other committees regularly talk about strategic communications, for more than a decade the practitioners in NATO have generally been left to their own devices to try to fix the attendant communication and

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The senior-most political and military authorities have allowed this situation to exist for years, watching, hoping and anticipating that perhaps over time these issues would resolve themselves on their own. They will not.

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information-related capability issues related to doctrine, processes and capability.

Many of the core issues are deeply rooted in national political history and experience, or by the specific nature of a consensus-based political-military Alliance. More than eight years after the NATO StratCom Action Plan identified major capability shortcomings to be fixed, and more than six years after an overarching StratCom policy was agreed by the North Atlantic

Council, the same fundamental issues persist. In view of the massive ISAF effort, the challenges exposed by other complex contemporary operations, and the changed information environment, this institutional inertia, particularly of the Military Committee, is hard to fathom. The senior-most political and military authorities have allowed this situation to exist for years, watching, hoping and anticipating that perhaps over time these issues would resolve themselves on their own. They will not. The onus for changing *this* narrative should rest with the political-military leadership at the North Atlantic Council and the Military Committee, not exclusively with practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of a full-time Theatre Information Coordination Cell during the ISAF V command of Lieutenant-General Hillier in 2004 was the first expression of a construct in ISAF HQ anticipating StratCom. As an operating concept, StratCom in NATO arguably started to take shape and form in 2006. In May of that year, forces from NATO nations fighting under the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom and alongside the Afghan military took on the Taliban in the south during Operation Mountain Thrust. At the end of July, as the security situation deteriorated, the south transitioned from U.S. to NATO command, leading in September to Operation Medusa, the largest Alliance ground operation in its history. Both of these operations signalled that the Taliban were returning in force, that they had tactical skill, field capability and



Salh Mohammad registers to vote at the Voters' Registration Centre for men, Farah, Afghanistan, 2009.

Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

by living amongst communities and having access to sanctuaries in Pakistan, that they would not be easily beaten. It also resulted in a new phenomenon for many troop contributing nations - casualties from military operations that looked a lot like war thousands of kilometres from their borders. Much of the action was covered up-close and in considerable detail by embedded media.

During ISAF IX (2006/07) the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) took the concept of information campaign synchronisation a large step further with a unique organisational feature called the Joint Effects Branch, headed by a one-star general who was responsible for creating desired outcomes through the coordination of information and kinetic actions. That command also benefited from the addition of a strong NATO civilian voice in theatre to help link NATO HQ with the separate but complementary focuses of the Senior Civilian Representative and the COMISAF in Kabul. In Brussels, the Media Operations Centre was also taking form and would prove instrumental to prosecuting the communications campaign.

At SHAPE in Mons, Belgium, the situation with respect to public communications capability was decidedly less satisfactory. In the recollection of one senior military public affairs officer, it was “a real throwback, it was The Office That Time Passed By”.⁴ Related communication and information

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 4 Personal communication. Reaching back to 2001, for instance, the SHAPE Public Information Office had 3 computers linked to the Secret network, where all operational information was stored and exchanged, including 'taskers'. This, for a staff of 30, a situation that did not make post 9-11 media operations efforts 'robust'.

policy, where it could be had, was outdated. There was limited capability to even post material to the Web. There was no capacity to receive or transmit imagery including video though the new American Chief Public Affairs Officer was quick to link up with the multi-million-dollar U.S. military video distribution system to get a hub established in Afghanistan and thereby fashion a Band-Aid solution ahead of NATO TV two years later.⁵ It was at the strategic-level operational HQ where the public information challenges of working with the NATO security classification system were most pronounced with almost every document or image related to Afghanistan classified, usually secret, with a cumbersome process to clear information for release.⁶

If the summer of 2006 was a wake-up call for Brussels, then the Riga Summit in November 2006 was an alarm bell though not quite a 'Kosovo moment' for the Alliance.⁷ There was a realisation that without a serious intervention, including a change of tactics and a major resourcing of communications, the media characterisation of the campaign would degrade public support and political will for the mission and ultimately undermine the Alliance.⁸ Still, in spite of the rude awakening there was nothing in the final meeting communiqué from Riga to suggest that better communications capability was an issue deserving mention.

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5 Interview with Colonel Derik Crotts, SHAPE Public Affairs Officer, 2006-09.

6 NATO security regulations (at least, at the time), identified four levels for document classification – Cosmic Top Secret, Secret, Confidential and Restricted. The unauthorised release of information characterised as secret would, according to the regulations, result in "grave damage" to NATO, so it was taken seriously. There were 34 different security markings, representing combinations of the four classifications to cover each of the different missions underway and whether information could be released to various sets of partners. Even NATO UNCLASSIFIED was a security marking; that is, as NATO copyright property it could not be made public without the explicit permission of the organisation, usually the author. The only marking that did not need security review before release was 'non-sensitive information releasable to the public', reserved mainly for community events-related activities happening at the base. In the early years of ISAF, publicly releasing information, however non-descript, was not a clear-cut thing.

7 During the 1999 NATO air campaign against the former Yugoslavia, notwithstanding the personal performance of Spokesperson Jamie Shea, the public information effort was recovered only after a major, immediate infusion of resources by nations to beef up the capacity and capability of NATO Press & Media, which was poorly structured and terribly under-resourced to meet the demands of a (then) modern-day communication effort. The media approach at NATO pre-Kosovo was founded on the assumption that little was needed at the HQ in Brussels, since in the event of an operation media were expected to seek information from, and attend briefings at, national capitals.

8 Major shocks to the NATO system that drive transformation of the communications function seem recently to happen about every seven years: Kosovo 1999 (featuring widespread use of on-line video); Afghanistan 2006 (with world-wide Internet access and new media business models); and Ukraine 2014 (including the ubiquitous advent of smart phones, social media and quality government-sponsored propaganda on a major scale). Arguably, the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of the independent states around 1991-92 that necessitated new outreach, partnership and engagement strategies (about the time of the rise of the Internet) further illustrates this idea.

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At the 2014 Wales Summit, StratCom reform received another shot in the arm, the third such mention at a Summit and the first since 2009.

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In 2007, as the operational situation deteriorated further, efforts were launched to identify and correct shortcomings in the communications approach and weaknesses in both capacity and capability. Allied Command Operations created a StratCom Advisor position at SHAPE, the North Atlantic Council agreed to a StratCom Action Plan, and a new NATO Military Public Affairs policy was approved along with a Military Committee plan to

build capability though that languished, unfunded. Later that year at a major NATO public diplomacy conference in Copenhagen, Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer publicly acknowledged major deficiencies in the Alliance communications effort and made an impassioned plea for nations to do more and to do better, particularly with respect to establishing national public affairs-related capability.⁹ At the same time, Denmark was spearheading an initiative to establish NATO TV and thereby begin to address one glaring deficiency that stood out among many in the Alliance communications tool kit.

The April 2008 Bucharest Summit marked a breakthrough of sorts by identifying the communications capability problem in the larger setting of a Summit, and committed to further enhancements.¹⁰ In May, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates asked aloud how we were (still) being out-communicated by a -man living in a cave, picking up on Richard Holbrooke's comment of a similar vein from 2001. In September 2008, Allied Command Operations

9 See <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2007/s071008a.html>

10 "Today's information environment, in particular with regard to our operations in Afghanistan and Kosovo, underlines the need for appropriate, timely, accurate and responsive communication with local and international audiences in relation to NATO's policies and engagement in international operations. We welcome the progress made in enhancing NATO's strategic communications capability, as demonstrated by the rapid response Media Operations Centre. We also welcome the launching at our Summit of a new NATO TV channel on the internet which will include regular news updates and video reports, in particular from the various regions of Afghanistan. We underscore our commitment to support further improvement of our strategic communications by the time of our 2009 Summit." [Article 10]

issued the first (of three) iterations of a StratCom directive (ACO 95-2) that resolved to group communication capabilities and later that year, COMISAF General McKiernan created a one-star general position to head StratCom.

As recounted earlier, the effort stumbled at first, was criticised in the press, and reviewed at NATO before being allowed to take place in modified form after concerns had been mollified.

The April 2009 Strasbourg/Kehl Summit marking the Alliance's 60th anniversary continued on the theme of StratCom capability building though notably all its eggs remained in the two same baskets of the Media Operations Centre and NATO TV.¹¹ The absence of strong communications direction and guidance was beginning to be felt: NATO's Joint Analysis Lessons Learned Centre, in a report on ISAF in 2009, found that, "the implementation of Strategic Communication unsupported by agreed policy, doctrine and lead entity, and without a supporting political and military process to generate a NATO vision and narrative, has been the cause of confusion in ISAF and more widely within the [NATO Command Structure]."¹² Later that year, the first NATO StratCom policy was approved.

General McChrystal's command as of summer 2009 pushed the reset button on the entire campaign. It was framed by a new and powerful strategic narrative, supported by a new Deputy Chief of Staff Communication Division, and headed by a two-star, the first professional communicator to serve at this rank in ISAF.¹³ This served to redefine how the related disciplines in ISAF would be structured, resourced and coordinated going forward. Armed with new leadership momentum, top-level policy, a major investment in tools of the trade, modest improvements in capacity building including within the Afghan government to take more responsibility to communicate with its citizens, arguably things could now change for the better. They did, but just enough to start to arrest the precipitous decline and mitigate the aggregate damage from years of past policy choices.

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 11 "As NATO adapts to 21st century challenges in its 60th anniversary year, it is increasingly important that the Alliance communicates in an appropriate, timely, accurate and responsive manner on its evolving roles, objectives and missions. Strategic communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives. We therefore welcome the improvements in NATO's strategic communications capability and public diplomacy efforts that we launched at our 2008 Bucharest Summit, particularly the enhancements to the NATO HQ Media Operations Centre, and the increased output of NATO's television channel on the internet. We underscore our commitment to support further improvement of our strategic communications by the time of our next Summit." [Art.16]

12 NATO Joint Analysis Lessons Learned Centre.

13 And, as it turned out, the only one. Even the U.S. with its deep well of personnel in communication and information-related capability functions, could not rouse a second 2-star from their system to follow Rear-Admiral Greg Smith.



Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Gen. Stanley McChrystal and President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai, in Arlington, Virginia, 2010. Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

The communication effort would continue to be a tough slog for years to come, particularly in light of the disputed Afghan national election in 2009 and the crisis in the UN thereafter; President Karzai's increasingly angry attacks against ISAF including threatening to join the Taliban; Afghan national security force members killing their trainers (so-called 'green-on-blue' attacks); and the lack of demonstrable progress in counter-corruption, rule of law and counter-narcotics efforts. By 2011, the general view of the situation was that the West was still being out-played on the communications front, as was most notably characterised by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: "During the Cold War we did a great job in getting America's message out. After the Berlin Wall fell we said, 'Okay, fine, enough of that, we are done,' and unfortunately we are paying a big price for it. Our private media cannot fill that gap ... We are in an information war and we are losing that war. Al Jazeera is winning, the Chinese have opened a global multi-language television network, the Russians have opened up an English-language network. I've seen it in a few countries, and it is quite instructive."¹⁴

Throughout the campaign, a sizable PSYOPS group (Combined Joint Psychological Operations Task Force, or CJPOTF) was deployed, led by Germany through to mid-2011 and thereafter by the U.S. and then Romania.

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 14 Remarks to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2011. Retrieved at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/02/AR2011030206898.html>

The CJPOTF built and ran an Afghan-wide radio network, published a massive number of newspapers, a large billboard campaign and provided considerable material for television productions. In the initial period of ISAF this was a major contribution to the barren Afghan media landscape.

Over the course of the campaign the effort proved effective at providing the population with general information about the mission, reconstruction and development efforts, and information of a public service nature. But changing behaviour in the face of differences between what NATO was saying and what NATO/OEF were doing was beyond the capability of the communications campaign and NATO's credibility with Afghan audiences began to suffer. No amount of radio, TV or leaflets was going to change that.

There may not have been one seminal "Abu Ghraib" moment that was the catalyst for a more strategic communications-minded culture, but there were three significant waypoints. The first was the publication of 12 cartoons in a Danish paper in September 2005 depicting the prophet Muhammad, and which keenly illustrated how events far removed from the operational theatre could have world-wide consequences: Danish President Anders Fogh Rasmussen (who went on to replace de Hoop Scheffer as NATO Secretary General) called it "Denmark's worst international crisis since World War II." Then, the fighting in the South in summer 2006 demonstrated how unprepared NATO HQ and NATO nations were to manage Alliance and national communications efforts in a contested campaign. And, the increasingly dire but officially understated situation in theatre that led to the dismissal of General McKiernan in mid-2009 signalled that a total mission reset was required lest NATO face defeat in Afghanistan. Until that point though, most StratCom initiatives were incremental in nature, a defensive response to an aggregation and compendium of problems including a regular drubbing in the media, the domination of Afghanistan in media interest over everything else on the Alliance's agenda, and the stalled campaign driven in part by an inability to generate forces, all of which called for a more effective and coordinated communication effort.

ISAF was the trigger for a number of minor adjustments and resource reallocations though not a catalyst for transformational communications change at NATO HQ. By now, nations expected the media criticism of the campaign, even if they were not entirely inured to it. National delegations hoped they had substantively dealt with "that damned StratCom thing", as one NATO Military Representative put it – a policy had been issued, finally; resources within the Public Diplomacy Division had been re-assigned; a Media

Operations Centre was functioning¹⁵ and was widely and highly-regarded; and it looked like mechanisms were being established in committees and working groups. If the ‘news wasn’t getting any better’, then at least it looked like something was being done.

The November 2010 Strategic Concept and subsequent Summits in Lisbon (2010) and Chicago (2012) were all silent about NATO HQ communications requirements or the need for national reforms.¹⁶ This either indicated a certain degree of satisfaction with progress to date, or signalled a loss of appetite to do more given that a drawdown of U.S. forces by President Obama (and thus the NATO mission) had been announced in December 2010. And the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector in Libya in 2011 seemed to validate that in spite of criticisms, the NATO communications function, particularly in times of crisis, could be reinforced over several weeks’ time, could be successful, and could compare very favourably with that of other large international organisations.¹⁷

But NATO was not as nimble as a country or non-state actors that were prepared to put information effect at the heart of national strategy and massively resource it. Russia’s occupation of Ukraine’s Crimea region in 2014 was effected with careful

15
A Media Operations Centre was established at NATO HQ during the Kosovo air campaign, but that capability was transitory, and needed to be reconstituted from scratch for the ISAF mission.

16 A minor reference from 2012 is found in one section of a support document: "NATO will also promote common understanding of its counter-terrorism role as part of a broader international effort through engagement and strategic communications." The 2010 Strategic Concept, a core Alliance planning document, notes virtually every threat or development that might bear on defence and security issues of the day including terrorism; the proliferation of nuclear weapons; threats from cyber, biological or chemical weapons; trafficking in arms, people and narcotics; vulnerable transport links; space; the environment; global warming; and energy security ... but does not contain a single reference to the power and impact of the transformation of the information environment.

17 'Success' is a relative term, given that the situation in Libya is far worse now than the *status quo ante bellum*. From a communications perspective, NATO arguably got off lucky, 'winning' in some respects in spite of itself. Access to Libya by independent media throughout was limited. The pro-Gadhafi government propaganda effort was crude and widely discredited from the start. As such, the information environment was benign if not already favourably disposed to NATO. The scramble to establish a new NATO military HQ in Naples to run the operation, separate from the existing U.S.-led Joint Force Command HQ already there once again exposed the lack of national communication and information-related capability throughout the Alliance. This was particularly acute in the first stage of the campaign, when it proved a challenge even to find a suitable NATO military spokesperson, an effort that took several weeks to satisfactorily conclude. "My public affairs staff on day one of mission start consisted of a Greek artillery officer and a displeased Italian reservist lawyer," recalled a senior communications officer who worked in the Naples HQ [personal communication]. Early planning identified a requirement for up to 40 staff for the Combined Joint Task Force information centres and this was whittled down during operations to about 17, though the fill rate did not exceed 80%. "There was also a very high turnover of augmentees which caused significant organisational turbulence," noted the after-action report. "Many were untrained PAOs, [or] minimally trained and had never worked in a crisis response situation, and were unfamiliar with NATO, its structure or its PA policy." The PSYOPS element fared worse, being unable to generate a unit (known as a PSYOPS Element) until three months into the campaign, and remained challenged by Internet connectivity issues, a high level of Voluntary National Contribution staff turnover and manning shortfalls of at least one-third of the staff requirement. The NATO communication effort was staged and directed out of the Media Operations Centre in Brussels, under the NATO Spokesperson's direction, drawing on a VTC link to Naples for joint press conferences and support from SHAPE. From SHAPE Strategic Analysis Team Report, *Operation Unified Protector* August 2011; also see Mark Laity, "The Latest Test for NATO", *The RUSI Journal*, February 2012, Vol. 157, No. 1.

thought and skilful application of multiple communication channels designed to solidify national Russian public support and create confusion amongst critics and opponents about the truth of what was happening. NATO Ambassadors found initially that there was little outside traditional public diplomacy and routine public affairs activities that could be brought to bear in response.

Again, the notion that NATO was losing the communication battle was prevalent as if somehow adversary behaviour could change outright on the basis of the volume of strongly-worded news releases and more media appearances by the Secretary General and SACEUR. Consequently, at the 2014 Wales Summit, StratCom reform received another shot in the arm, the third such mention at a Summit and the first since 2009. This time it was a much more serious commitment than more public diplomacy events, better imagery or enhanced content for a more navigable website. Instead, the expressed sentiment and subsequent work related to the Readiness Action Plan revolved around more substantive undertakings designed to achieve an information effect, demonstrating resolve and assurance through a range of actions and activities that could then be actively communicated.¹⁸

As the situation in Ukraine was taking a turn for the worse, a coalition of more than 60 countries and entities was forming to meet the challenge posed by Daesh (widely referred to as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL). The parties to the coalition first met as a group at NATO HQ Brussels in December 2014, though the venue was a place of convenience rather than an expression of any particular intent on the part of NATO.¹⁹ Daesh have to this point very effectively exploited available technology and the communication channels afforded by cheap video production costs and global access to the Internet to prosecute a massive communication and information campaign highlighting brutality, destruction, and how they provide some of the basic functions of a state. The material is of high quality and has succeeded at showcasing its operations and methods with real impact. The shock value has drawn recruits to its cause though it remains to be seen how effective that is beyond short-term success for recruitment from abroad and the intimidation of local populations. Still, it raised the spectre and complaint once again of Western nations being 'out-fought' on the communication front.

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 18 ".... It is essential that the Alliance possesses the necessary tools and procedures required to deter and respond effectively to hybrid warfare threats, and the capabilities to reinforce national forces. This will also include enhancing strategic communications, developing exercise scenarios in light of hybrid threats, and strengthening coordination between NATO and other organisations, in line with relevant decisions taken, with a view to improving information sharing, political consultations, and staff-to-staff coordination. We welcome the establishment of the NATO-accredited Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia as a meaningful contribution to NATO's efforts in this area. We have tasked the work on hybrid warfare to be reviewed alongside the implementation of the Readiness Action Plan." [Article 13]

19 As stated by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, at <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/12/20141203311589.html#axzz3keyfRID8>

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While NATO laboured to secure a clearer and more consistent narrative for ISAF, the operational tempo precluded active, direct engagement to sort long-standing known problems in communications-related capability, capacity and policy.

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It is useful then, to recount the major developments in NATO HQ StratCom to discern what that tells us about how it impacted or may have influenced the ISAF campaign, what lessons can be drawn, and whether StratCom is fit for purpose going forward against new and more formidable defence and security-related challenges.

DISCUSSION

Operational and Policy Tempo

NATO Summits, featuring the Heads of State and Government are a significant high-level meeting opportunity, a key driver for policy change and thus a major work generator for the International Staff, International Military Staff, the NATO Command Structure and national delegations. In the Summit lead-up period there is a considerable effort to identify ‘announceables’ or ‘deliverables’ – initiatives to attract news, generate attention and provide a public impression that much has been decided and accomplished. This generally takes the form of initiatives to improve capabilities, enhance existing programs including partnerships, or identify ‘concerns’ in the security environment, signalling that the Alliance is not unaware of other security-related issues that could emerge and result in a call for action by nations.

There have been 26 NATO Summits in the Alliance’s 65-year history through to 2014 with eight occurring during 2003-2014 when NATO led ISAF – five of those in just seven years (2006 Riga, 2008 Bucharest, 2009 Strasbourg/Kehl, 2010 Lisbon, 2012 Chicago) throughout the most intense period of operations in Afghanistan.²⁰ As a former Military Representative observes, “The role of Summits has changed from being held irregularly in response to a particular strategic shift or crisis with a self-evident agenda, to a more routine event where the agenda has to be created unless a suitable crisis happens to come along after it has been scheduled. The implications for StratCom thus differ.”²¹

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20 The other Summits during the ISAF campaign were 2004 Istanbul, 2005 Brussels, and 2014 Wales. Afghanistan also featured at the 2002 Prague Summit.

21 Personal communication.

Summits inform a considerable part of the agendas for various high-level meetings including the preparations for and implementation after when staff pore through the ambiguous language used to obtain consensus in order to work out ‘what did the leaders really agree to?’

There are generally two Foreign Ministerials per year, two Defence Ministerials per year, weekly North Atlantic Council meetings with Ambassadors of each nation, weekly Military Committee meetings with Military Representatives from each nation, and three meetings per year at the Chiefs of Defence level, all of which intensify in the few months leading up to the leaders’ gathering.

In 2006, as the transfer of command to NATO for Afghanistan’s south loomed large, HQ staff were still working to implement earlier Summit deliverables including from Istanbul (2004) that welcomed seven new members and expanded partnership engagements through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. A mini-summit (Brussels, 2005) had also committed to a greater NATO-EU partnership. In the lead-up to Riga 2006, other pressures were afoot including a KFOR mission that was more sensitive than usual in light of the Kosovo status talks. In addition, it was a huge undertaking to draft the Comprehensive Political Guidance, “a major policy document that sets out the framework and priorities for all Alliance capability issues, planning disciplines, and intelligence for the next 10 to 15 years.”²² This was the first substantial recasting of NATO’s core values, principles and objectives since 1999, and had been due for a serious update in light of the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., new partnership requirements and the multiplicity of Alliance operations undertaken, including Afghanistan. Furthermore, ministerial guidance from June 2006 had pointed Alliance military planners away from ‘one big war’, instead calling for a structure that was “increasingly geared to ensuring that NATO can conduct a greater number of the more likely smaller-scale operations than in the past.”²³

Other significant new work and time demands were the purview mainly of the various NATO military staffs. The operational tempo had been unusually high. In the year and a half leading up to summer 2007, NATO conducted eight operations of various size, scale and duration on four continents.²⁴ This was a

22 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_56425.htm. No, nothing about communications or the changed information environment.

23 <http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2006/06-june/e0608b.htm>.

24 In addition to ISAF there was the modest-sized mission to train, mentor and equip Iraqi forces (NTM-I); assistance to victims of Hurricane Katrina in the U.S.; Pakistan earthquake relief in October 2005; air logistics and training support to the African Union; a counter-piracy naval mission off the coast of Somalia (Allied Protector); the KFOR presence; and, the maritime surveillance mission to detect and deter terrorist activity in and around the Mediterranean (Active Endeavour). If one is generous and includes air support to major events including the Olympics in Greece and NATO Summits, then the number of distinct operations was nine during this period alone.

formidable achievement for an organisation often written off as lacking purpose or will, and which just before the Kosovo air campaign in 1999 counted just 16 members and whose first 'out of area' operation was in the Balkans. Three nations from that region were receiving support following an invitation to join the Partnership for Peace program. Conceptual work was being done to set out how to better organise efforts during conflict situations (the Comprehensive Approach), and to further develop the in-vogue theory regarding the conduct of operations (the Effects Based Approach to Operations). Another of an ongoing series of Peacetime Establishment Reviews sought further reductions to military HQs and manpower requirements.

There was also the NATO Response Force (NRF) to bring online, it having reached Initial Operating Capability (IOC) in October 2004. Nothing was going to stop it from being fully realised at the Riga Summit: it was, in fact, declared 'ready', but only after a last-minute significant addition of critical enablers from the U.S.²⁵ As the situation in Afghanistan began to deteriorate in summer 2006, nations were concurrently pressured with demands often for the same critical enablers (helicopters; medical units; information, surveillance and reconnaissance or ISR) and forces to fill out the rest of the NRF for each of its six-month rotation cycles, the expanding Afghanistan mission, other national-only undertakings, plus missions for the EU and the UN. In addition, for many nations the coalition effort in Iraq, to which 19 of the current 28 NATO members contributed forces, was very much a factor.

Many of the larger nations were also refining and building new capabilities in other NATO-accredited high readiness Corps-level HQs that are part of the NATO Force Structure, while at the same time drawing down their own forces. To add to the defence planners' lament, some members were also striving to concurrently stand up EU battle groups which were scheduled for Full Operational Capability (FOC) at the start of 2007: these were of considerable interest to nations eager to see the EU have more capability at the expense of NATO. In Iraq, the U.S.-led coalition was surging forces to deal with a massive outbreak of sectarian violence.

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 25 The irony was not lost on observers of a 'fully operational' (though perennially under-resourced) high readiness force that relied almost exclusively on U.S. transport assets but couldn't, or wouldn't, be used to deploy and fight in a real operation where it was needed, such as in southern Afghanistan. The spectre of SACEUR General Jim Jones actually recommending its deployment there hung over protracted discussions about force levels, and the thought that he might publicly declare its need was regarded by staff as the 'nuclear option'. In fairness, recalls an experienced senior NATO hand, many nations were against the use of the NRF as a means to make up for shortcomings in the force generation process for ongoing missions like ISAF, or for its use in situations like earthquake relief. "Nations were logically arguing that, if something really serious was to happen while the NRF was employed in that kind of mission, the consequences would be disastrous." [Private Communication with former NATO general officer].

All that to illustrate that as Afghanistan became ‘operational priority number one’ and the main effort for the communications community, it was hardly the only major priority and effort underway for the Secretary General, the Public Diplomacy Division, HQ staff, and the Military Committee.

This considerable array of significant operational and policy engagements also demanded staff attention from the headquarters, drawing on resources, effort and time. While NATO laboured to secure a clearer and more consistent narrative for ISAF, the operational tempo precluded active, direct engagement to sort long-standing known problems in communications-related capability, capacity and policy.

Re-establishing the Media Operations Centre (MOC)

The expansion of the mission into the south of Afghanistan quickly exposed the lack of planning by NATO HQs to adequately prepare for the communication and information campaign that was to come; the media deluge was fast and initially overwhelming (see Chapter 4.9: ‘Realities of the Information Campaign at RC(South), 2006-2008’).

Later, the move to the east with NATO assuming security responsibility throughout the country compounded the challenge though Regional Command (East) had a homogenous force make-up and relatively robust communication capabilities that needed less oversight than the other regions.²⁶ “The rationale for the expansion was never really clear internally within NATO,” recalls a Military Representative who served at the time. “There was a sense of inevitability, of unchallenged mission creep. With that being the case inside, creating a strong external message was almost impossible – leading to a cottage industry of what each troop contributing nation was actually there for. All this was exacerbated by the crucial split aim of NATO stabilising while the U.S. was still in post 9/11 kill-and-capture mode.”²⁷

By spring 2006, Afghanistan was still the part-time effort of just one media relations official at NATO HQ. This was clearly not going to be a satisfactory answer to managing the media component, let alone the suite of all the other communication and information support activities needed to shape and buttress the public narrative. It was left to the NATO Spokesperson to drive

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26 Three years on, even after years of staff-level enhancements, particularly at RC(S), General McChrystal's assessment of 30 August 2009, had this to say: "Throughout the ISAF chain of command StratCom elements must be structured and resourced appropriately, and manned at the requisite levels of expertise to achieve the desired effects. Some of these elements are known to be relatively weak in RC(N), RC(W) and RC(C) and will need augmenting." p.D-5.

27 Personal communication.

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The fullness and depth of effort that the mission would demand from across the breadth of all of NATO's HQs and not just the Public Diplomacy Division was slow to dawn on NATO HQ but particularly the Secretary General and key staff in the Private Office.

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the effort in the knowledge that public perception about the mission and cohesion of the Alliance was in no small measure a reflection of how successful the media campaign would be. A variety of prospective organisation charts to upscale the MOC were proposed. In a time of finding efficiencies including zero real growth then zero marginal growth (thus, downsizing) where ‘one extra person’ meant ‘one fewer person somewhere else’, the prospect of arguing for a

significant re-allocation of resources was not taken lightly. By late summer of 2006 though, the HQ could lay claim to a basic, functioning MOC capability which it then built to 15 staff by late 2007.

The insurgent communication effort did not need to be sophisticated to gain widespread pick-up in media coverage. Their videos and claims were broadcast often with little to no effort at independent verification.²⁸ NATO was now less able to disassociate itself from the Operation Enduring Freedom mission than was the case when the former operated just in and around Kabul. The time necessary to disentangle what NATO's own forces including Special Forces may have been doing, let alone those of Operation Enduring Freedom was no match for the speed of the Taliban's efforts. In very short order and presumably without a lot of time or effort ‘staffing the media lines’, their spokesperson could pick up the phone and have an unadulterated version of events on world newswires and on Al Jazeera. The ability of deployed NATO elements to get ahead of the story in any event was limited, especially in light of the time it took given troop levels to conduct battle damage assessment, the sparse public affairs capacity at the Regional Command where the bulk of embedded media were staying and covering national forces, and the reluctance to release information about NATO casualties before next-of-kin had been informed back home.

The fullness and depth of effort that the mission would demand from across the breadth of all NATO's HQs and not just the Public

Diplomacy Division was slow to dawn on NATO HQ Brussels but particularly the Secretary General and key staff in the Private Office.²⁹ It would take time to adjust and re-allocate shrinking budgets that still needed to service the many other non-Afghanistan lines of effort.

Incremental funding had not been provided and it was a delicate balancing act amongst nations eager to see that their own areas of national public diplomacy interest weren't negatively affected as a result. Overarching strategies, narratives, master messages, and media lines had to be developed, refined and staffed as events on the ground unfolded. In this respect, the MOC was able to rely to a considerable degree on draft products from SHAPE and even Joint Force Command Brunssum. Many thorny policy problems defied easy answers and complicated the crafting of media lines,³⁰ and a myriad of committees required regular updates on the effort and state of the communication campaign, including how Afghans were perceiving the NATO effort.

At first, even establishing a count of NATO forces was a major staff and coordination effort. Some nations wanted the number of forces attributed to them to publicly appear smaller than were actually deployed, some wanted to count forces deployed outside Afghanistan but in the region in direct support, and some did not want their contribution publicly acknowledged. Separating NATO and Operation Enduring Freedom forces to learn the number under NATO command was not a clear-cut exercise at times even for nations. It was January 2007 before the MOC was able to publicly and regularly provide a 'placemat' of the number of forces and contributing countries. This required regular and sustained effort thereafter to keep updated. Accounting for the number of NATO killed and injured posed a similar challenge. It was too difficult a proposition, until the negative coverage of "NATO doesn't even know how many of its forces have died in battle" forced staff to come up with a methodology. The 'placemat challenge' was symptomatic of the lack of clarity around the mission aim as well as the reticence of many nations to characterise ISAF to their own publics for what it really was, or to explain why or how it had changed including the implications. The Secretary General, who was predisposed in any event to an active public profile as a key part of the advocacy campaign, increased the number of his media availabilities and visits to troop contributing nations in an effort to build faltering public opinion and support for additional military assets. More interviews meant more direct support as media requests for the spokesperson from around the world multiplied.

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29 Interviews and exchanges with Senior NATO Executives.

30 The extent to which Pakistan should be publicly called out for support to the Taliban, how porous was the Iranian border to weapons smuggling in support of the insurgency, and the nature of the military role in the counter-narcotics effort were just three of many that fit this description.

Efforts by NATO officials and military officers at SHAPE to obtain and declassify imagery for public use were almost always for naught, but it was not for lack of trying: it took the Dutch Secretary General's direct intervention to help secure gun camera footage from operations conducted by Dutch Apache gunships so it could be released at an opportune time. The number of media covering Ministerial meetings grew. The requirement for media monitoring, assessment and analysis intensified significantly though assessments and analysis was weak – and by several accounts, a situation that endures at NATO HQs.

New words and acronyms entered the public lexicon including caveats, force generation, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs), thus creating further demand for more background information and more content to explain it all to media and to enhance NATO's well-visited on-line presence. As casualties mounted and some nations grew more vocal about other nations not fighting in the south, the public information staff from national delegations at HQ Brussels were suddenly more engaged as they were pressed by home nations to learn what NATO was up to and, if possible, to try to shape the messaging. At first it was a one-way download of information from MOC staff but in time it became more of an exchange as nations better organised their own public communications efforts and contributed ideas, support and suggestions. Transatlantic opinion leader tours, sponsored media visits to Afghanistan, and visits of senior officials and opinion leaders from Afghanistan to Brussels were organised. This was a major administrative undertaking but resulted in valuable outreach and third-party advocacy and commentary favourable to NATO. The work of the Senior Civilian Representative in Kabul took on greater need and urgency calling on more support to that quarter as well.

The MOC also tried to protect a small forward planning capability (J5 in military parlance) focused exclusively on what could happen up to a year out. This 'thinking forward' approach enabled a modest level of engagement with a broader community including the UN, EU, Non-Governmental Organisations, advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch, and with the wider intelligence and long-term operational planner communities in nations. "This small team was prohibited from doing media operations, plans or anything day-to-day so they could always be looking up and out," said Chris Riley, the first MOC manager. "They were able to get good insight and situational awareness on shock-bombs including NGO reports on detention and to try to get coordinated media responses on some issues. It gave us a taste for properly thought-through communications planning and coordination, as required by StratCom."



ISAF Spokesperson Brigadier-General Richard Blanchette and Afghan Major-General Mohammad Zabir Azimi, spokesman for the Afghan National Army. Photo courtesy of Brig.-Gen Blanchette

Linking and staying attuned to Allied Command Operations took more time, effort and energy. The long-standing daily morning conference call chaired by the SHAPE public affairs office with all deployed NATO operations became longer and more detailed as the daily information flow about Afghanistan-related issues intensified.

The NATO HQ Afghanistan Information Operations Task Force, established in June 2003 by the Operations Division of the International Staff, morphed into the ISAF Information Strategy Working Group and became a forum for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs discussions, co-chaired by the Operations and Public Diplomacy Divisions. Its prospective value for addressing other current operations such as Kosovo informed a decision to change the name again to the Information Strategy for Operations Working Group. The relatively new technology of secure VTC provided a tool to effect greater coordination among Commands and theatre including with ISAF. Between the morning conference call, regular VTCs, a functioning MOC and reliable email and phone communications into theatre, the ‘tech net’³¹ was a generally fast and reliable means – often considerably more so than through the chain of command – of sharing information and managing responses to the many large and small crises, either real or self-generated.

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 31 This refers to informal consultation between communications colleagues regardless of the level of HQ at which they work. It is used to exchange information expediently rather than wait for the cumbersome and lengthy process of official correspondence up and down the formal military chain of command.

The speed and efficiency of the tech net was a further demonstration of the need for a NAC-agreed policy document that described functional responsibilities and authorities for StratCom.

Though NATO HQ realised its communication function was not sufficiently organised, structured or resourced to manage the intensity and volume of interest either in theatre or at the HQ from nations across the breadth of the Alliance, it chose to re-orient its resources rather than to risk major organisational change to effect greater synchronisation of effort. The MOC became the fulcrum of the NATO communications effort as well as the main link on the file to Public Diplomacy, other Divisions, the Secretary General's office, national delegations at NATO, and to the military with the NATO Spokesperson acting as coach and the MOC Manager its quarterback. Its personnel liaised formally and informally with dozens of member and partner troop contributing nations through the NATO delegations and direct to national ministries of defence as occasions required.

MOC staff also regularly deployed to backfill in the Senior Civilian Representative's (SCR) office in Kabul for weeks at a time. Creating a civilian spokesperson position in that office was an initiative in direct response to the attack on the Norwegian Provincial Reconstruction Team in Maymana in early 2006 (linked to the Danish cartoon controversy). The Spokesperson and later the addition of a Deputy Spokesperson worked for NATO HQ rather than through the military chain at ISAF, building long-standing relations with Afghan media, extensive contacts with international agencies and Afghan officials, and thus obtaining a deep knowledge about the mission which could be ported back to the whole of the MOC. Having an office 'deployed forward' in this way served as a valuable means of exchanging information, and guidance to and from theatre.

At the nexus of the public information effort, the MOC operated like a political campaign war room, albeit one lasting several years, and was a very successful blend of strategic, operational and tactical communications. Given the significant emphasis put on Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in a large and highly visible Alliance, the position of Spokesperson was already considerably more influential than the rank – at the top-end of mid-level officials – would suggest. The success of the MOC, with a core capability including former military officers skilled in communication and supplemented by several voluntary national contributions,³² could also adjust to meet the

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 32 Voluntary national contributions (VNC) is a staffing arrangement in which a nation agrees to cover the salary and living expenses of select staff at no charge to NATO, for specific tasks usually for a prescribed period of time.

most pressing demands of the day including the Operation Unified Protector mission in Libya. This all inflated the influence and position of the NATO Spokesperson within NATO HQ.

“In reality, there evolved a natural prioritisation of issues, gelling around Afghanistan,” recalled Chris Riley. “While one press officer dealt with everything Russia-related and one on partnerships and capabilities, everyone else worked flat out on Afghanistan. This was also reflected in the tone and pace of pre-summit Ministerial work by committees that despite all the other issues ticking along, ‘it’s Afghanistan, really’ reflected a real need to focus on an operation that was garnering significant public attention and political energy at the same time.”

Media Pressure Intensifies

It is at the Foreign and Defence Ministerial meetings in the months leading up to Summits where the agenda, initiatives and pronouncements get progressively elaborated. These tend to occasion flashes of media attention that grow as Summit day approaches and as some nations, usually without being directly named, try to frame and shape the agenda through exclusive interviews in ways favourable to them, or to try to shore up waning national support. In turn, NATO officials also look to set policy conditions for Summit success through formal media briefings in an effort to inform and shape the pre- and post-Summit coverage.

In the lead up to Riga 2006, the annual chiefs of defence conference met that September in Warsaw, followed by defence and foreign affairs ministers meetings later that same month. This marked the start of much more aggressive media questioning to senior NATO officials about force generation, caveats, the security sector lines of effort, and overall campaign progress.

The campaign in Afghanistan, force levels, and caveats dominated the discussion and coverage at Riga. The situation in theatre starkly exposed the many divisions between countries about the very nature of what the mission was meant to be, especially between those that were in the fight and those that were not. The American, British, Canadian and Dutch were the most vocal about the need to make more troops and helicopters available. There was also the unhelpful spectacle of countries not directly involved in fighting in the south expressly *not* removing caveats to provide ‘emergency support’, a situation that engendered public condemnation of allies by allies. Of the entire ISAF campaign, this public infighting probably stands as the defining characteristic of the NATO ISAF mission.

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There was no sugar-coating a pill as bitter as that: it was not a ‘all for one and one for all’ effort – a reality that gained traction and came to be described as a two-tiered Alliance featuring unequal burden sharing with some “Allies willing to fight and die to protect peoples’ security, and others who are not.”³³ Notwithstanding, Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer put on a brave face at the time, noting that “contributing to peace and stability in Afghanistan is NATO’s key

priority” and was optimistic about Afghanistan’s future, remarking that five years after the defeat of the Taliban, Afghanistan was “no longer a threat to the world.”³⁴

It was another symptom of different domestic narratives necessitated by a bifurcated NATO/Operation Enduring Freedom mission, and for critics, a symbol of everything that was wrong about NATO. That “caveats are not about cowardice, but implicit deals with electorates and explicit deals with legislatures,” which allow nations to contribute to the extent assessed to be politically acceptable in the first place, was lost on critical publics and leaders.³⁵ A number of Allies and partners did remove a few caveats and deployed some additional assets to the south to help out including Belgian and French fighter jets, French Operational Mentoring Liaison Teams (OMLTs), and Georgian units, “but once the fighting/not fighting narrative took hold, it was virtually impossible to shift,” recalled an official working in the Media Operations Centre at the time.

By late spring 2007, things had come to a head. A number of key factors impacting the campaign defied agreement including the failed counter-narcotics effort and how to deal with Pakistan – both falling in the “too hard” category for policy

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33 Secretary of Defense Gates. See <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1e505e66-d54b-11dc-8b56-0000779fd2ac.html#axzz3n3CiyY00>

34 Riga Summit declaration, para 5.

35 Personal communication with former Military Representative.

coherence in a consensus-based Alliance. NATO Ambassadors in the North Atlantic Council and military representatives in the Military Committee were joined in consensus on one thing though - the Alliance was losing the communication battle and its credibility was suffering tremendously, if not yet at its nadir.

The two most important force contributors (the U.S. and UK) were engaged simultaneously in an even more difficult and fractious military campaign in Iraq and were upping the pressure on Allies both to remain in Iraq fight and take on more of the burden in Afghanistan, where the mission was a grind and at best a stalemate in the southern and eastern provinces.

Nations were hard pressed to satisfy their national remit for an enhanced public communications effort at home *and* in theatre let alone to offer additional substantive support to deployed NATO HQs. Where they did, some of those fills were by military personnel without communications experience – not surprising given the majority of countries did not have professional branches for any of the constituent disciplines. Communication and information-related doctrine and policy was dated and far from robust, and each senior-level meeting in Brussels included a chorus of voices asking for NATO to ‘do something about the situation’. The NATO Spokesperson at the time, James Appathurai, as the most visible public face of the organisation aside from the Secretary General, bore the brunt of the effort trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. A series of discussions in the North Atlantic Council, begun in part to engage and tease out the nations that were the most critical yet were doing little on their own to help out, finally culminated in early July 2007 with the first institutional commitment to upgrade NATO communications capabilities.

This set in motion an initial flurry of work and a series of actions and activities that are still taking form almost a decade later, as will be set out now.

Action Plan on NATO’s Strategic Communications **(North Atlantic Council: 24 July 2007)**

The *Action Plan on NATO’s Strategic Communications* appears to be the first substantive reference to the term ‘StratCom’ in an agreed NAC document. At the time, StratCom was widely understood to mean nothing more profound than better coordination of public affairs and public diplomacy activities, and enough oversight of Info Ops and PSYOPS so as to guard against any major surprises in the communications domain.

The Action Plan was informed by practitioners at SHAPE and identified nearly two dozen items for remediation within five areas: build Afghan

capacity; improve coordination between ISAF, the (Operation Enduring Freedom) coalition and Afghans; improve coordination among NATO and troop contributing countries; enhance NATO/ISAF public information capabilities; and build a 21st century communications ability.³⁶ It was a practical focus on capabilities development, not mechanisms to enhance the synchronisation of effort, since it is hard to do the latter absent the former. It specifically identified shortfalls in manning the Media Operations Centre and in video production capability where it noted that NATO HQ “largely lacks the ability to capture, produce, store, and distribute video or photo material from theatres of operation.” Media monitoring and analysis was weak and made even more challenging due to the volume of coverage in many languages across the Alliance. And there was little NATO HQ could do to support Afghan government capacity to better communicate with its own citizens. It was also agreed to appoint a general officer to serve as the first full-time ISAF spokesperson, an initiative that continued to the end of ISAF: a Portuguese officer was the first to deploy, followed by two Canadians and then four Germans, all in one-year deployments. The Action Plan was an acknowledgement that the Alliance could do a pretty fair job at answering media queries at the main HQ in Brussels, but was hard pressed to set the media agenda in NATO member and partner states or to counter insurgents’ propaganda effects in Afghanistan.

The effort was the first, modest *cri de coeur* for resources and that brought together the communication communities from SHAPE, the International Military Staff and the Public Diplomacy Division to work together to detail their specific needs, primarily of a military public affairs nature. This particular focus on one function was because all NATO HQs in the command chain had public affairs capability to deal with real-time requirements which can be scaled up when assigned responsibility for an operation or exercise. There are considerably fewer Info Ops or PSYOPS assets at this level beyond a minimal number of staff officers (at SHAPE there is one Info Ops officer and one PSYOPS officer), as these capabilities deploy from nations only when an operation is initiated. The task at hand, *four years into the NATO-led ISAF mission*, was to identify the needs and try to find and build the assets required to deliver physical product, as well as develop at the strategic level a more robust capability to manage the full scale of the communication effort. The demands to produce basic print content including for public and media consumption on the Web and to support media opportunities for the Secretary General and major meetings was considerable, let alone the resources to provide quality

visual imagery output that would resonate with audiences. Separately, Denmark was also working on an initiative that would become NATO TV, which started to produce material for the NATO website in summer 2008.

Enhancing NATO's Strategic Communications
(Military Committee: 31 October 2007)

In turn, the Military Committee provided its assessment of the military requirement to meet the Action Plan's remit in its *Enhancing NATO's Strategic Communications* document, which also emphasized core, basic capabilities mainly around Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, informed by the demands of ISAF.

The consensus view was that "NATO Public Diplomacy and military Public Affairs shortcomings in particular are putting at high risk the political-military strategic Centre of Gravity for the Afghanistan operation ("maintaining Alliance cohesion") and negatively affecting organisational credibility."³⁷ The Military Representatives agreed "the principal constraint is that less than half a dozen NATO nations have a full-time Public Affairs Branch/career field, so the pool from which to draw is very limited. There is also a significant domestic requirement for this same semi-specialist capability 'fixing the function' is more than simply encouraging nations to fill empty positions on the [Peacetime Establishment and Crisis Establishment]. The need is more fundamental – it is to encourage and facilitate the creation of this capability in nations where it does not currently exist..."³⁸

The document identified "stratcomm [sic] minimum military requirements" – each being assessed as being nil to modest in nine areas listed in order of most pressing need:

- collect, edit, process and provide still and video imagery;
- more effective military voice communicating to internal and external audiences;
- upgrade the content of websites;
- better management of Public Affairs issues;
- more, and better quality executive-level products (strategies, talking points, narratives, speeches);
- Public Affairs training to joint battle staffs at NATO facilities before deployments;
- host, sponsor and conduct targeted media visits;

.....
 37 MCM-0135-2007, *Enhancing NATO's Strategic Communications*, 31 Oct 2007, p. 4.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 5. The Peacetime Establishment or PE, are the full-time positions on staff; the Crisis Establishment or CE are full-time positions that are identified and meant to be filled by nations when a situation presents itself that is beyond the capacity of the PE staff to handle.

- a J5-like plan-ahead function to “help develop and shape the media, communication and information battle space”; and
- coordinate horizontally and vertically within theatre to Regional Commands.

As to be expected the Action Plan came with a bill – 19 contractors and 27 additions throughout the ISAF Crisis Establishment and the NATO Command Structure – and a call for more than €5 million. In the time-pressured, resource-constrained environment of the day and in the midst of a difficult establishment review, it was ‘just one more thing’ and events quickly moved on, without any additional resources. The call for capability improvement and doctrinal renewal satisfied at least for the moment, the desire by Ambassadors and Military Representatives to be seen to be doing something. Arguably, the effort had planted a seed that reform on a broad footing was required, setting in train a discussion that was a long time in the making and built awareness of national and institution-wide operational communications shortcomings. It also served as the catalyst for incremental investment and re-allocations by the Public Diplomacy Division for capability enhancements, particularly to refine and build out the communication core asset that was the MOC, assisted along the way with voluntary national contributions.

MC457/1 NATO Military Public Affairs Policy **(Military Committee: September 2007)**

Efforts to rewrite the various NATO military communication policies (Public Affairs, Info Ops, PSYOPS) had been afoot for some months. It took longer than it should, constrained by the classic time demands of limited staff needing to tend to real-time requirements and various other policy support needs, and a sense that nations were not likely to reach consensus on proposals to have NATO forces on operations more actively use social media, and on the functional name change. The discussions leading to the Action Plan provided useful context to nations considering a new military Public Affairs policy that was informed by the work, lessons and experience of communicators at standing and field HQs including ISAF. As the communication function most under direct scrutiny and with its hand in many of the requirements relating to the Action Plan, Public Affairs at the Military Committee/International Military Staff level needed to be the catalyst for communication-related doctrine refinements at NATO, SHAPE and ideally thence to nations. Conceptually, ‘StratCom’ at the time was still two years away from being defined by NATO, and one year away from being defined at SHAPE.

The first substantive effort to detail a NATO policy in the function had been MC 457 (NATO Public Information) from June 2001, which replaced “Censorship of Information in Times of Crisis and War, 1976”, and “[Military Committee] Guidelines on dealing with the Press, 1997”.

It “filled a yawning policy gap, spoke to the importance of proactive communications, and confirmed a reporting chain for Public Affairs direct to the commander.”³⁹ Still, it was informed by the Kosovo air campaign and the relatively benign KFOR mission, was pre- 9/11, for all intents and purposes ‘pre-Internet’, and was focused mainly on how to establish good media relations with domestic NATO audiences.

In 2008, MC 457/1 instituted nearly two dozen substantive changes including a name change from Public Information to Public Affairs, thus creating policy space to move beyond just media relations and acknowledging that internal info and outreach/community relations formed a triad of functions. The definition of military public affairs changed from being a passive provider of information – “inform the general public about the Alliance and its activities, providing as much information as possible to the citizens of NATO and Partner countries and to other nations when the situation warrants such extension” – to a more active undertaking and with a described effect – “... to promote NATO’s military aims and objectives to audiences to enhance awareness and understanding...thereby enhancing organisational credibility. Audiences can be allied, international, regional, local or internal, depending on the issue or activity.”⁴⁰

Notably, the definition did not include the words ‘gain support’ though this was implied by the inclusion of the effect of enhancing organisational credibility. Gaining support sounded too much like changing behaviour thus an influence activity and language that was too similar to Info Ops or PSYOPS to be supported by all nations.⁴¹ The word choice was also an acknowledgement that passive or neutral observers or even insurgents and opponents were attentive consumers of NATO public communications and thus were a key audience. They would certainly not be inclined to support NATO as a desired outcome but would, perhaps and if only grudgingly, acknowledge that the Alliance did what it said it would do and thereby be seen as matching actions with words.

39 Brett Boudreau, "Readier for a Brave New (Wired) World: Highlights of the New NATO Military Public Affairs Policy," *The Three Swords Magazine*, Joint Warfare Centre, 11/2007, p.26.

40 MC457/1.

41 In a consensus-based organisation like NATO, not all need to say 'yes' to a proposal, but no nation can say 'no'. Policies are therefore very rarely optimal outcomes, but a careful balance of word choice to avoid a situation where one official or officer in at least one national capital that advises national delegations in Brussels could 'break silence' and thereby stop the effort.

As soldiers were dying and being injured in Afghanistan, a discussion over such distinctions seemed esoteric at best, and is evidence that the communication communities were without an overarching, defining framework that could set out simply and definitively how they all should work together to coordinate activities to all target audiences for greatest effect.

ACO Directive 95-2 Strategic Communications, v.1
(Allied Command Operations: 15 September 2008)

The publication of the ACO 95-2 Strategic Communications Directive is the first attempt to formally elucidate NATO military thinking in the StratCom field. Document titles notwithstanding, previous NATO HQ efforts were focused just on improving public affairs capability and thereby improve efforts by both NATO and nations (that, in turn benefitted the Alliance). This document marked a tentative first step at identifying a way to bring together Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs and Info Ops under one umbrella to better coordinate collective effort with the intention of StratCom being “at the heart of leading and managing our response to the challenges of the information era.”⁴²

The notion that StratCom was more than just better conjoined Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and actually part and parcel of a broader effort to inform decisions is first expressed here in the ACO Directive, not in NATO HQ policy. ACO 95-2 included a NATO military StratCom definition: “*In concert with other political and military actions*, to advance NATO’s aims and operations through the coordinated, appropriate use of Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, and Information Operations,” which in fact served as a base for the 2009 NATO StratCom policy one year later.⁴³

The directive set out objectives, working relationships and lines of responsibility with considerable focus on how StratCom was expected to participate in developing and distributing messages. The Military Committee was briefed on the initiative and noted that it did not have nations’ approval, thus would not be considered as a Military Committee policy. NATO-wide consensus is not required for Allied Command Operations Directives so 95-2 was issued to its commands under SACEUR authority. The work was significantly but not exclusively informed by the ISAF mission. At this point, with no other StratCom elements in place at NATO, it was a modest beginning.

In a related vein, 2008 marked the beginning of StratCom annual conferences supported by the two Strategic Commands bringing together lead communicators

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 42 ACO 95-2 (15 Sep 2008), para 1-3.

43 Emphasis added for this report.

from NATO communication and information communities in the main troop contributing nations, NATO HQ and ISAF to discuss objectives, common approaches, doctrine, policies, procedures and lessons learned. These increasingly inclusive undertakings directly supported the ISAF mission and served to build awareness, understanding and support for StratCom in a field of endeavour that was still in the early stages of being defined and refined.

NATO Strategic Communications Policy
(North Atlantic Council: 29 September 2009)

Excepting the stand-up of NATO TV and the reinforcement of the Media Operations Centre, the good words from the Action Plan two years before had not translated into noticeable effect at NATO HQ, Allied Command Operations or downrange at ISAF HQs. All the operational indicators in Afghanistan were trending down, culminating in May with the no-notice firing of COMISAF General McKiernan and the nomination of then-Lieutenant General McChrystal to replace him, along with a new operational entity that would become the ISAF Joint Command (IJC) under Lieutenant-General Rodriguez. In September of that year, the bombshell of the leaked General McChrystal assessment hit the *Washington Post*, laying the situation out in stark terms: “Failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near-term (next 12 months) – while Afghan security capacity matures – risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible.”⁴⁴

There continued to be criticism about NATO communications but many nations were more interested in having a scapegoat at hand than in helping effect real change if it came at a cost to them. “The hypocrisy of some nations was incredible,” recalled one official who regularly attended North Atlantic Council and Military Committee meetings at the time. “It was rich to watch those Ambassadors or Military Representatives who were literally pounding the table over what they considered to be a failure of NATO, be from the same countries that had no deployed military public affairs capability, no deployed PSYOPS capability, a virtually invisible or even distinctly unhelpful public diplomacy effort, and no intention of spending money to create any of that. An ‘everyone else but me’ mentality infested the place.”⁴⁵

That the NAC StratCom policy passed silence a week after the General McChrystal assessment story broke is a telling indicator of the angst around the Afghanistan mission at the time.

.....
 44 COMISAF's *Initial Assessment*, 30 Aug 2009, p. 1-2.

45 Confidential interview.

The policy was drafted out of the Press and Media office, considerably influenced by the Spokesperson and informed by SHAPE. It bore the hallmarks of the ACO 95-2 directive but little evidence of contributions by Info Ops or PSYOPS. A previous draft of the policy had circulated months earlier, but nations had been very reluctant to entertain discussions about it conceptually and it was held in abeyance. The fourth consecutive year of spring offensives by the Taliban (or NATO, depending on one's viewpoint) with no end in sight, galvanised action.

Now, after many years it would finally be more readily acknowledged within NATO that there were operational reasons for the untenable situation in Afghanistan, not simply because the campaign lacked a “cohesive, consistent narrative”. Still, hope in the power of communications was never far from the minds of many, and somehow if only ‘we could just do that better’, insurgents might stop being recruited, media would be less critical, and public support for the mission might grow. The NATO StratCom policy objectives were to be: “modern in technique and technology to match the information cycle; proactive; engaged with, and responsive to, public opinion at all levels, as appropriate; demonstrate consistency of messaging and the maximum possible transparency, in order to promote understanding and trust; and fully integrated in the development and execution of NATO’s policies, operations and missions.”⁴⁶ Importantly, it was also the first communications policy document for the civilian component of NATO, which up to that point referred to and used the various Military Committee policies informally as a guide.

The formulation for the definition of NATO StratCom was, and remains today:

“The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims.”

The intent was to coordinate Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs activities better, not re-shape related functions to more directly influence and change behaviour or more seamlessly integrate ‘actions’ including kinetic means. Notably, the policy was not grounded in real debate or substantive discussion either in the North Atlantic Council or the Military Committee, and even prompted a written rebuke from the International Military Staff director over the staffing time allowed for the Military Committee to review and comment on it.⁴⁷

46 PO(2009)0141, NATO Strategic Communications Policy, 29 Sep 2009.

47 Interview with principal in the International Military Staff at the time (and, internal correspondence).

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Notably, the policy was not grounded in real debate or substantive discussion either in the North Atlantic Council or the Military Committee, and even prompted a written rebuke from the International Military Staff director over the staffing time allowed for the Military Committee to review and comment on it.

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It was an expedient effort that grouped the functions under one umbrella for the first time at NATO HQ level. It also satisfied the immediate, ‘break glass in case of an emergency’ need for a policy and was likely the best the market could bear at the time. It included seven principles (see Table 5: A Comparison of Strategic Communication Principles) with a focus on quality and speed of product and maximising audience size.

It included a page of definitions, and almost two pages of roles, authorities, and relationships.

It was more a statement of responsibilities than an expression and articulation of policy, intent, or desired specific effect, with modest aspirations being to “contribute to general public awareness, understanding and support of NATO ... help build public awareness, understanding and support for specific NATO policies, operations and other activities in all relevant audiences ... [and] contribute positively and directly in achieving the successful implementation of NATO operations, missions and activities...”⁴⁸

The policy distinguished civilian public affairs from military public affairs, noted that Info Ops is a military function, and implied but did not explicitly state that PSYOPS is also a military-specific activity. The document took pains to reinforce that the Military Committee-approved Info Ops, PSYOPS and Public Affairs policies remained extant, and reinforced the separation of disciplines and the firewall between personnel from Public Affairs working in Info Ops staff, and vice versa.⁴⁹

.....
48 Ibid.

49 The Military Committee policies for Info Ops, PSYOPS and Public Affairs were subsequently revised to bring them in line with, or at least to include references to the 2009 NATO StratCom policy, without fundamentally changing what any of them did or how they operated.

Responsibility was assigned to the Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy (ASG PDD) to “oversee the coordination of all Strategic Communications activities across all NATO civilian and military bodies and commands, and also directs all public diplomacy activities (except press and media, which are directed by the NATO Spokesperson on behalf of the [Secretary General]”. In addition to that distinction, the NATO Spokesperson “...provides day-to-day direction of all Headquarters media activities, including messaging, and offers guidance to military PA to ensure that all NATO messages and communications are consistent with political direction and decisions.” The 2009 NATO StratCom policy:

- Identifies four specific capabilities and one integrating function as part of the coordination remit: three are military (Info Ops, PSYOPS and military Public Affairs), and two are civilian (Public Diplomacy and civilian Public Affairs);
- Establishes that NATO considers StratCom as a process, not a mindset or capability. This accords well with proponents particularly within the U.S. communication communities;
- Embeds two routes for direction and guidance to occur: through the Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy as the coordinating authority for all StratCom activities including public diplomacy (excepting press and media), and through the Spokesperson;
- Describes existing responsibilities, assigns accountability and authorities, and spells out a requirement to establish a standing body to “bring together relevant elements of the communication and information community”;
- Reinforces two solitudes: Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at NATO HQ are meant to conduct their suite of activities, and military Public Affairs, PSYOPS and Info Ops are essentially meant to ‘do their own thing’ within the military structures ... but with careful oversight of the public affairs component where the daily media fight was being fought. It did not seek to clarify how in actual practice, the coordinating entity Info Ops was meant to relate to the coordinating entity StratCom. It was a political-military policy but without the means to integrate the effort;
- Served to confuse military operational and tactical levels by using a definition that was very similar to that already existing for Info Ops;
- Introduced problematic ambiguity into the conduct of operational communications, blurring the point at which ‘oversight and day-to-day direction’ of military operations within the NATO HQ began and where it stopped. For example, as written, the description of

responsibilities (“oversee all StratCom activities across all military bodies and commands”) could suggest a desire or intent for all tactical PSYOPS products used for ISAF or any other operation such as Operation Unified Protector, to be reviewed and/or approved within the Public Diplomacy Division at NATO HQ;⁵⁰ and

- Focused exclusively on coordinating communications activities, not on a broader consideration of all actions within NATO that served to generate effect and influence.

In the extant NATO StratCom policy of 2009, StratCom is viewed as an ‘add-on’ to the policy-making function, not an integral part from the beginning of a deliberative process that counts information effect as a key factor in formulating and deciding policy and actions in the first place. Thus StratCom is a collection of related but separate functions that is expected to communicate decisions effectively and as coordinated and in as coherent a manner as possible, not as a function to help shape the decision in the first place.

ACO Directive 95-2 Strategic Communications **(Allied Command Operations: 19 November 2009)**

The second iteration of 95-2 built on the first effort, incorporating the recently approved NATO StratCom policy and requiring subordinate HQs to create or adapt their structures, processes and procedures in order to nest StratCom as a “cross-divisional coordinating and enabling function.” It also strengthened the language around authorities vis-a-vis the other communication disciplines, ascribing to ACO StratCom responsibility to “provide oversight of the various components of the information community as they deliver strategic effects in their focus areas.”⁵¹

Strategic Communications Frameworks **(NATO HQ and SHAPE HQ: February 2010)**

There were almost as many national narratives as nations in the mission, but in many ways this was a natural outcome of the need and requirement for different countries to make a nation-specific case to their own publics as to why ISAF was a mission worth contributing to and sustaining. Regrettably though, nations even employed multiple narratives of their own, a reflection of intra-state wrangling amongst contributing departments of defence, foreign affairs, development and others, about how to define why the forces and officials were in Afghanistan.

.....
50 "It's a real problem. It's like suggesting that the NATO HQ Operations Division would be responsible to coordinate artillery fires," explains a practitioner. [Private Communication].

51 ACO 95-2 (19 Nov 2009), para 2-2a.

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“The real value in the StratCom Frameworks and other messaging instruments was the process of actually getting there,” said Chris Riley, the first MOC director.

“Having the main communicators from the various organisations together to discuss and really hash out the issues, to refine product and get something that could be signed off by everybody’s boss and be issued from the highest levels, eventually the Secretary General himself, was worth its weight in gold.”

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In contrast, a variety of coordination mechanisms actively employed by NATO HQ and SHAPE meant NATO messaging was surprisingly consistent, if unduly broad to capture every nation’s interests.

The McChrystal review reset the mission and established a coherent, credible strategy around which StratCom efforts could be made more clear. This led to the development of a StratCom Framework, a document that in simple and concise terms

set out for the chain of command, overarching message guidance to inform and shape communication efforts throughout the NATO network. The first StratCom Framework was built around the five themes of resolve, unity, clear strategy, realism, and fresh momentum. It was a joint NATO Spokesperson/SHAPE StratCom effort that neatly took advantage of each organisation’s strengths to produce a product that could be used throughout the system to prosecute the campaign. StratCom Frameworks were updated annually providing guidance to the chain of command and to troop contributing nations.⁵²

All the while though, there continued to be an expectation and palpable desire amongst senior leaders that somewhere a paper-based strategic narrative could be produced that would knit together the considerably divergent policies in play in theatre, and to convince malign actors to stop what they were doing. The StratCom Frameworks were complemented by ‘rolling briefs’ (guidance to assist in explaining the mission), media lines, regularly updated master messages and Ministerial/Summit-specific products, all of which were regularly distributed to nations and partners via the MOC, and to ISAF through the chain of command. As such, it can be fairly said that ample communications-related guidance was provided by NATO HQ and SHAPE to the chain of command and to the nations. This is a view shared less by practitioners in ISAF than at NATO HQ, but it is valid all the same.

“The real value in the StratCom Frameworks and other messaging instruments was the process of actually getting there,” said Chris Riley, the first MOC director. “Having the main communicators from the various organisations together to discuss and really hash out the issues, to refine product and get something that could be signed off by everybody’s boss and be issued from the highest levels, eventually the Secretary General himself, was worth its weight in gold.”⁵³

Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communications
(Military Committee: August 2010)

On the heels of the 2009 StratCom policy came a task from the Military Committee to Allied Command Transformation in October 2009 for an “enabling document, supporting the development of long-term professional StratCom *capabilities* within the military forces and structures of the Alliance.”⁵⁴ The concept set out the rationale, need and requirements in unequivocal terms. “Everything NATO and its partners say, do, or fail to do and say, has intended and unintended consequences,” is a key theme in the document.⁵⁵ “Every action, word, and image sends a message, and every military member is a messenger, from the individual soldier in the field to the theatre commander. Every operation, even the smallest tactical engagement can have Strategic Communications consequences, and unintended audiences are unavoidable in the global information environment.”⁵⁶ If nations agreed that premise then, “leaders must properly resource Strategic Communications at a priority comparable to other important areas such as logistics and intelligence.”⁵⁷

The concept paper noted that existing doctrine lacked an overarching view of how the communications elements might or should be integrated, and identified nine required military StratCom capabilities:

- coordinate NATO and coalition information and communications activities with other military actions, to shape the battle space and maximise desired effects;
- coordinate information and communications activities with efforts of other agencies and partners;
- access, produce and maintain updated info and knowledge on ‘perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs of potential audiences’;

.....
 53 Interview.

54 Emphasis mine.

55 DSG (2010) 0528, Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communications, 12 August 2010.

56 Ibid., p. 3.

57 Ibid.

- obtain knowledge on complex social communication systems, including media agencies;
- detect, monitor, translate and assess StratCom effects whether [Friendly Forces], neutral, adversary;
- develop target audience analysis (though not stated as such, including knowledge of perceptions, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and actions);
- develop and disseminate ‘culturally-attuned messages’;
- develop and disseminate information to influence approved audiences; and,
- document operations and exercises and disseminate this information in real time to media and the public, including through social media.

The paper articulated requirements under the DOTMLPFI framework (doctrine, organisation, training, material and technology, leadership, personnel, facilities, interoperability). This formidable paper stands the test of time. It remains (as of December 2015) the overarching foundation for the further development of military StratCom in NATO and continues to be used today to frame capability development, education, training, exercises, as well as informing the draft MC 0628 StratCom Policy.⁵⁸

NATO StratCom Military Capability Implementation Plan **(Military Committee: February 2011)**

Armed now with an overarching political-military policy and a military concept, the two NATO Strategic Commands worked to develop general and specific actions to address each of the nine identified military StratCom ‘capabilities’. The result was a programme led by Allied Command Transformation that championed the process, setting a baseline for funding and manning including a programme manager and director to coordinate the effort.

The development of StratCom doctrine including production of an Allied Joint Publication was “an urgent operational requirement”⁵⁹ and the most important of seven high-priority, six medium-priority, and four lower-priority action items. At the same time, it acknowledged this could be problematic as there is “currently no resident StratCom expertise available (as this requires training, a prerequisite of which is the availability of doctrine).”⁶⁰ And, there were recommendations for several (non-funded) activities including an analysis

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58 Personal communication with official at the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

59 IMSWM-0051-2011 NATO Strategic Communications Military Capability Implementation Plan (CIP), 21 Feb 2011, p.14.

60 Ibid.

of the existing NATO StratCom structure and practices, though one of the risks to the effort being completed was “competing StratCom organisations in various headquarters will hamper the analysis process.”⁶¹

Thus, effort was focused on actions that were assessed to be achievable in the absence of any further overarching guidance or clarification of the 2009 StratCom policy. A senior officer familiarisation course was developed by ACT and taught at the NATO School in Oberammergau.

With help from the German-led Multinational Information Operations Experiment (MNIOE), a full methodology to assess and analyse the information environment was developed and tested in ISAF’s Regional Command (North). The MNIOE also helped build a tool to assist the development of narratives at the strategic level, which was introduced to NATO in 2014. A StratCom handbook was developed, a strategic training plan approved, and for Exercise *Trident Juncture 2015*, StratCom was included as one of the primary training objectives. The accreditation of a Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in late 2014 with an agreed Program of Work was another requirement articulated in the Capability Implementation Plan. In this respect, the StratCom section at Allied Command Transformation Capability Development in partnership with Allied Command Operations StratCom has been successful in maturing the function through concepts, capabilities, directives, handbooks and the draft MC policy.

The NATO Strategic Communications Policy Board (SCPB) **NATO HQ StratCom Cell (NATO HQ: from July 2011)**

As part of a broad NATO HQ reform effort, in February 2011 the Public Diplomacy Division undertook a review and recalibration of activities including to “strengthen strategic communications structures and capabilities and secure NATO-wide coordination.”⁶² Almost 18 months after the StratCom policy, a full-time mid-level official was brought in to lead the effort and two part-time administrative staff members were assigned, with responsibilities added to the International Military Staff Public Affairs/StratCom Advisor’s office that were to be carried out by a voluntary national contribution, when available. It was a modest effort and investment to establish a focal point for taking the NATO StratCom policy forward. The cell was to be responsible for the “coordination and synchronisation of NATO’s communications activities and capabilities”; ‘management of all Strategic Communications programming, plans, conferences, seminars, documents and activities...’; “to input and develop StratCom Plans/

.....
61 Ibid., p. 17.

62 PDD (2011) 0216 StratCom Cell - Terms of Reference, 1 July 2011.

“

The expectation that the policy and a mid-level official on staff would somehow make all NATO communications more coordinated, was not a recipe for success.

”

Frameworks for all priority issues and operations...” and to act “...as StratCom champion in NATO HQ.”⁶³

The StratCom Policy Board (SCPB) was the mechanism derived from the 2009 overarching policy to bring together the heads of the NATO HQ divisions together with the senior civilian and military officials and representatives from the Secretary General’s Private Office, at the time including a Special Advisor on Strategic Communications.

It would be chaired by the top NATO public diplomacy official, the Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy. There were high ambitions for the senior standing body (supported by a subordinate Working Group), charged to “ensure that all NATO HQ policy divisions and the military chain of command coordinate and engage in the planning and execution of NATO StratCom”, and to “ensure that StratCom considerations are an integral part of NATO’s policy and operational planning processes.” An annual report was expected including an assessment of performance and achievements. It was an expansive terms of reference and a dramatic expression of intent.

The initial momentum of the SCPB led by the efforts of the Assistant Secretary General Jean-Francois Bureau and then on his departure by deputy Stephanie Babst waned quickly without coming close to realising its lofty ambitions, this being a consequence of a number of factors. A lack of understanding still existed amongst NATO Ambassadors and the Military Committee about how StratCom was meant to be or could be operationalised, in part a deficiency of the policy construct itself, and the lack of discussion about its purpose and content in the first place. To be fair, there was equally a lack of clarity from them about what, specifically, were shortcomings in the existing approach and what they wished to see happen better at NATO. Pressure from the ISAF file had also eased following the troop drawdown announcement and the expectation

of an end to the mission. Assigning ‘champion’ status to someone other than the authority charged with the responsibility for its implementation did not bode well. Absent a broader understanding and hands-on, top-down guidance to put the policy into actual practice, the expectation that the policy and a mid-level official on staff would somehow make all NATO communications more coordinated, was not a recipe for success.

Most importantly, staff changes in key communications posts at NATO HQ took the wind out of StratCom’s sails. By July 2011, a new Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy was in place, one who had not lived through the evolution of the file as driven by exigencies of the ISAF mission. The StratCom initiative did not receive direct, overt support from the Press & Media office, which reported directly to the Secretary General. Eventually, a staff re-organisation in 2012 led to the re-assignment of responsibilities for the StratCom cell as a supplementary task to another mid-level official who already had other full-time responsibilities. The SCPB stopped meeting regularly, though the Working Group met periodically, but neither received enough active support from the other Divisions for any real traction to be gained. The NATO StratCom policy vested responsibility for its political-military application in the Assistant Secretary General Public Diplomacy, but faced with serious internal divisions, particularly from Press & Media over how it should be implemented, the effort to institutionalise StratCom within NATO HQ progressively waned from mid-2011, to be resuscitated three years later at the Wales Summit.

Strategic Communications Implementation Guidelines

(Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy Division: 2010 - late 2012)

The 2009 NATO StratCom Policy did not of its own accord immediately unleash a new-found awareness, establish mechanisms to energise new methodologies, or create products that realised better outcomes. What it did do was introduce and define a new term in the NATO lexicon. In and of itself this was not particularly instructive in elucidating specific direction and guidance to communications staff across the Alliance. To try to change that, the Public Diplomacy Division, with SHAPE and ACT in support, for a period of almost two years (2010-2012) worked to translate policy into tangible direction, guidance, and outputs.

The 2011 Capability Implementation Plan’s recommendation to develop StratCom doctrine as a first priority through an Allied Joint Publication did not find favour with the Allied Joint Operations Doctrine Working Group that needed to agree that it could proceed to drafting stage.

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The significant effort culminated in a substantive working draft that when circulated amongst the stakeholders fell apart over lines of authority.

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These multiple stakeholders from all over NATO in September 2011 concluded that the extant 2009 NATO StratCom policy did not contain the necessary detail to inform the development of Alliance-wide joint doctrine. Further, there was still not a generally accepted common understanding of the term, and developing military-only doctrine was rejected on the grounds that the StratCom policy was a political-military construct. A key element of

the Capabilities Implementation Plan roadmap had been rejected.

Instead, the group agreed to the development of joint implementation guidelines and to append them to the NATO StratCom policy, approved by the NAC, the highest Alliance authority. This approach, clever if it had been successful, would have served to embed a practical means to translate political intent into actions for both NATO HQ and NATO military authorities. And, it would have had the benefit of getting guidance out much faster than the several months or even years that it would take to create a new joint doctrine publication. All that remained was to do it. Work began to develop these guidelines as a means to put practical effect to the policy, to clarify ambiguities, and to provide explicit guidance on roles and responsibilities for the planning and execution of StratCom. The significant effort culminated in a substantive working draft that when circulated amongst the stakeholders fell apart over lines of authority, measures of effectiveness and the long-standing struggle over defining how in actual practice, to articulate and clarify the relationship between Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at NATO HQ, and between Public Affairs and StratCom as a coordinating entity. It was the continuation of a years-long struggle amongst the various functions at the strategic level, all striving to ensure another ‘new kid on the block’ did not usurp their traditional authority, responsibility and influence.

ACO Directive 95-2 Strategic Communications, v. 3
(Allied Command Operations: 21 May 2012)

The slow pace of movement to provide any further clarification of the 2009 StratCom policy through implementation guidelines was surely a signal to military authorities that they should not any time soon expect major changes to NATO's 2009 policy, mindset, capability or resources to emanate from NATO HQ. This directive, in its third iteration, made explicit the connection of matching actions with deeds by including the heretofore bugaboo of 'fires' (kinetic actions) and the role and place of StratCom in that significant aspect of operations: "StratCom coordinates communication capabilities and synchronises them *with lethal effects* in order to influence the opinions and behaviour of selected audiences by demonstrating NATO/ACO's power and will to succeed."⁶⁴

This directive marks a significant conceptual evolution in NATO StratCom in that it:

- describes a coordinating function "and a process and a mindset rather than a capability";
- provides general guidance on a methodology and means that informs 'how to do it';
- uses 'mission command' to allow manoeuvre space informed by key principles;
- identifies StratCom as a senior advisor along with specialist functions in the Command Group;
- notes that specific expertise is required by practitioners to be effective;
- advocates for all the communication and information disciplines;
- highlights that StratCom occurs at all levels of command, that organisations need to be structured accordingly, and to include having direct access to the commander;
- provides a StratCom 'framework' approach and template as a guideline; and,
- establishes information effect as a component of the decision-making process.



*Ribbon-cutting at the inauguration of the NATO StratCom COE premises.
Photo: NATO StratCom COE*

Creation of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (September 2014)

By the end of 2012, the StratCom initiative at NATO HQ within the International Staff and Military Committee if not dead had run out of steam, done in by legitimate differences of opinion over principles and concerns over the impact of change on organisational credibility. Communities of interest within NATO were also guarding their own turf and satisfied to let StratCom as an organisational construct wither. Given the authorities and responsibility vested in the 2009 NATO StratCom policy including the role of the Secretary General, the deliberate choice by the senior leadership to not seek to implement it, is intriguing. Staff, committees, delegations, the Military Committee and the North Atlantic Council had by then developed an allergy to the term StratCom – often it seemed “a load of gobbledygook” in the description of one observer, without identifiable progress, specific product or tangible deliverables to realise the policy ambitions.

There was traction elsewhere however, particularly within the NATO military HQs. A robust StratCom directive was in play if not in full force given that subordinate commands retained wide latitude about how to organise their HQs. Several of the nine land-based High Readiness Headquarters were gravitating toward a construct based on a grouping of functions under

StratCom, in five cases this being informed by their own ISAF deployment.⁶⁵ Conferences and workshops were showing evidence of greater cross-pollination. Training at NATO schools in Rome and Oberammergau was refined or developed in order to represent and teach StratCom. A detailed handbook for practitioners was prepared. Within Allied Command Transformation, StratCom was added to a list of potential future COEs for nations to consider. Latvia, sensing an opportunity to lead efforts in an area of considerable need with clear and obvious direct benefits to NATO members and partners, expressed interest and NATO HQ jumped at the prospect.

In September 2014, the Strategic Communications COE in Riga was formally accredited, completing a trifecta of profoundly relevant bodies related to pressing contemporary defence and security-related issues of the day, including in Estonia (Cyber Defence), and Lithuania (Energy Security).⁶⁶

Military Committee Policy on Strategic Communications **(Bi-SC: draft November 2015)**

The status of StratCom policy within NATO at ISAF mission at the end of December 2014, and still as of December 2015, was as follows:

- a NATO HQ policy that was six years old and widely believed by most practitioners to be of limited practical use;
- no Military Committee policy on StratCom;
- no Allied joint doctrine manual on StratCom;
- no national StratCom doctrine;
- guidelines in the form of an Allied Command Operations directive;
- a draft, if incomplete handbook for practitioners prepared by Allied Command Transformation; and
- a multitude of other operational, communication and, information-related doctrine and policies with references to StratCom, which could be confusing or conflicting.

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65 The Allied Rapid Response Corps (ARRC), Eurocorps, 1st German/Netherlands Corps, and national Corps-level HQs from Italy and Turkey deployed to Afghanistan to command ISAF. In addition, large elements of some Corps HQs also deployed to Afghanistan throughout the course of the mission.

66 Given the use and impact of information in modern conflict, it was prescient of Latvian authorities to establish such a facility when it did. The COE concept has quickly found favour with nations eager to have a NATO flag on its soil: the first was accredited in 2005, and the StratCom COE is the 21st to achieve the distinction. Presuming Slovenia's bid (mountain warfare) will be successful, it will be the 19th NATO member with one. What is surprising is how long it took for a nation to identify any aspect of information and communications as a need – given that COEs were already accredited in fields such as modelling and simulation; command and control; winter warfare; and, operations in confined and shallow waters.

The Readiness Action Plan remit from the Wales Summit called upon the two Strategic Commands to begin to rectify this shortcoming and in April 2015 the MC tasked Allied Command Transformation and Allied Command Operations to develop a NATO Military Policy on StratCom, with a specific remit for it to be “forward leaning”. Buttressed by overt four-star general support at both ACT and ACO, the respective communication functions developed a working draft product that did just that by the end of summer 2015.

The draft Military Committee policy is significantly different and more emphatic than previous efforts in a number of important ways. It includes recognition of StratCom as “both a communications capability and as a coordinating function”, and importantly, describes a shift from an advisory and integrating function to “holding the commander’s delegated authority to ensure coherence of NATO actions and words”.

It describes core principles and defines StratCom in the most broad and comprehensive way to date:

“The integration of military communication capabilities and functions with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the [information environment], to inform, persuade, or influence audiences in support of NATO aims and objectives.”

For the purposes of efficiency and unity of effort, the draft policy calls for a grouping of communication functions and capabilities, which are not named, in a deliberate effort to reinforce the concept that StratCom applies to all actions that could have an effect on the information environment, not just a number of discrete lines of activity. A StratCom head would be vested with coordination authority to “direct coherent communication planning towards aligned outcomes.” A Military Committee Policy of this breadth of vision, if approved, would then trigger a cascade of policy and doctrine changes in Allied Joint Publications, Military Committee Policies, and Allied Command Operations Directives. It should also lead to changes to NATO Command Structures, the NATO Force Structure including the nine land-based high readiness HQs, the NATO Response Force (NRF) and Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (JVTF), the Peacetime and Crisis Establishments, and ultimately the NATO Defence Planning Process. All this, in turn, would inform major changes to Allied and national training.

Achieving Bi-Strategic Command agreement on a draft that re-conceptualises the organisation of functions and capabilities in such a way is a notable accomplishment and testament to a realisation at least

within those communities that fundamental change in the information environment demanded transformative change in doctrine, structures and resourcing. As of December 2015, the draft continues to be reviewed and refined by nations.

NATO StratCom in the Context of Hybrid Warfare⁶⁷

The 2014 Wales Summit declared that NATO would “address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats ... [to] include enhancing strategic communications.” The Summit triggered a series of Readiness Action Plan-related tasks across the International Staff at NATO HQ and within the two military Strategic Commands that are culminating in several significant actions meant to address many key issues that have heretofore remained unresolved, in spite of or as a consequence of the 2009 StratCom policy.

This work is being overseen by the deputy ambassadors at NATO rather than the considerably more junior Committee on Public Diplomacy, itself a notable statement of intent.

A number of discrete actions have been agreed, including to:

- integrate communications considerations in policy discussions consistently, from the outset and directly with expert committees on specific issues, not through the Committee on Public Diplomacy and not *after* a policy has been agreed;
- improve planning and coordination, including to further strengthen the StratCom team at NATO HQ, and coordination between NATO’s civilian and military staffs, and Allies;
- develop a surge capacity to enhance the Media Operations Centre and NATO Public Diplomacy Division during crisis periods;
- intensify engagement with other international organisations, including with the EU; and
- improve military capabilities. Allies appear to have formally recognised that deficiencies exist in many communication and information-related disciplines, and signalled an interest in addressing StratCom requirements in the context of the NATO Defence Planning Process.

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67 The author is grateful for the opportunity to have participated in the NATO Information and Communicators Conference in Lisbon in September 2015, at which these developments were briefed.

SUMMARY

The aspirations for StratCom are not inconsiderable. Developments at NATO HQ following the 2014 Wales Summit are a quantum leap beyond anything that has been agreed or tried to this point. There looks to be real momentum behind the communication reform efforts at NATO and much is in train, particularly in terms of changing mindset. It is a long way, certainly, between stating good intentions and realising aspirations. Of particular concern is that national military reform in the various fields is not keeping pace with NATO. It is a capability gap that has always existed but is widening further and at an accelerating pace. The armed forces of NATO constitute its deployed forces, and NATO will look to fill the Peacetime and Crisis Establishment with calls to nations. Thus, the persistent problem presents itself yet again – limited national capability, and NATO HQs with a very modest ability to deploy forward any personnel other than individual augmentees, and only on an *in extremis* basis.

Given this history there is an obvious question of where the means to more emphatically execute this coordination function at the strategic level might have been placed to achieve better communication and operational outcomes for the ISAF mission. Currently, the North Atlantic Council and Secretary General are meant to *direct* all NATO StratCom, civilian and military. The Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy is *responsible* for overall coordination, excepting Press and Media (thus, including the Media Operations Centre), which is the purview of the NATO Spokesperson. As this evolution of StratCom in NATO HQ illustrates, that configuration has led to sub-optimal outcomes. The need is to better link political-military StratCom objectives and outputs with current operations (in a J3 context) and future plans (J5), at the strategic level. Some options include:

- keep the division of labour as is and use the recent reform initiatives as the means to inject new life into existing responsibilities for all parties;
- assign StratCom lead responsibility to Allied Command Operations/SHAPE (where strategic-level military planning is conducted) and/or jointly with Allied Command Transformation (with responsibility for doctrine, capability development, and training);
- assign StratCom lead responsibility to the International Military Staff (IMS); or
- construct an auspicious blend of the three.

This historical overview provides some insight into the prospective and expected outcomes of each. The Wales Summit and Readiness Action Plan suggest that the *status quo* is no longer acceptable. Allied Command Operations/SHAPE is key to any initiatives of this sort but as a military, not political-military HQ, it is rightly focused on operations, not on the full gamut of Alliance activities. Nor does it have explicit responsibility for the relevant doctrine, training and capability pieces, these being Allied Command Transformation's lead. Reform needs both, but neither have the necessary overarching authorities or capacity to effectively lead what is a political-military effort.

The IMS works to translate political direction for NATO military authorities, and to obtain consensus military advice on behalf of all nations for consideration by the North Atlantic Council. Critically, their work does not necessarily obtain the 'best military answer' to a situation or policy as this is the purview of the two Strategic Commands. Not infrequently, consensus is not possible or can be a gruelling process of give-and-take to secure enough support for all nations 'not to say no' to a policy, proposal or advice. The evidence over the years, as outlined here, is enough to show that the Military Committee has been AWOL (Absent Without Leave) in terms of its responsibilities regarding StratCom in NATO. As a staffing (not operational) activity crossing the senior-most political-military levels of the Alliance, the functional responsibility for NATO StratCom should not be left to the vagaries of the NATO military staff generation process and thus dependant on nations that have very little capability or credibility in the relevant communication disciplines, particularly at Colonel (OF-5) or Brigadier-General (OF-6) rank in any of the functional areas.

This analysis suggests that as a political-military capability, the functional authority for NATO StratCom would best reside in the Public Diplomacy Division at NATO HQ, where can be found the required authorities, continuity of staff and deep experience with respect to public diplomacy and public affairs. However, to be successful, the Public Diplomacy Division needs to be augmented by military staff experienced in Info Ops, PSYOPS and military public affairs – possible through an expanded Peacetime Establishment or a senior and experienced staff member seconded from each of the IMS, Allied Command Operations/SHAPE and Allied Command Transformation. The military augmentation would provide the link to SHAPE, Joint Force Commands and the deployed military communication and information staffs, drawing together political-military, current operations-future plans, Allied Command Transformation and doctrine-training-capability development. The trick, as ever, is through force of effort, personality and working to common purpose, to effect the connections that can bring forward best advice that is informed by military understanding and political imperatives.

CHAPTER 7: ASSESSING THE NATO ISAF COMMUNICATION EFFORT



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“The conflict in Afghanistan is often described as a war of ideas and perceptions; this is true and demands important consideration. However, perceptions are generally derived from actions and real conditions, for example by the provision or a lack of security, governance, and economic opportunity. Thus the key to changing perceptions is to change the underlying truths.”

General Stanley McChrystal¹

OVERVIEW

In the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks on the U.S., career diplomat Richard Holbrooke coined a phrase that proved a popular metaphor to characterize the public communication challenge for the United States (and the Western world in general), at that time epitomized by Osama Bin Laden. In an influential article in *The Washington Post* Holbrooke wrote, “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 out communicate the world’s leading communications society?”² Recalled less frequently was his powerful argument in the same article of the role of strategic narrative and the need to marshal the full range of national communication and information-related capabilities in modern-day conflict:

“Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or – if you really want to be blunt – propaganda. But whatever it is called, 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.... The battle of ideas therefore is as important as any other aspect of the struggle we are now engaged in. It must be won.”

What is NATO and ISAF’s score on that point, and if it did not ‘win’ outright, how did the communication efforts perform? The extent to which unsatisfactory campaign outcomes including unwanted behaviours in Afghanistan could or should be attributed to the communication effort is not an inconsequential subject. It is a classic chicken-and-egg problem – does good policy beget good StratCom, or is it that effective StratCom is the foundation for policy success? More intriguingly, is a very good StratCom effort enough to salvage marginal or less-than-optimal policy? Alternatively, does a poor StratCom effort doom good policy? Presumably, bad policy poorly communicated is the worst combination.

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COMISAF *Initial Assessment* (30 August 2009), p. 2-3.

2 "Get the Message Out", Sunday, October 28, 2001: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/13/AR2010121305410.html>

This chapter then, is an effort to consider and assess whether the ISAF campaign can best be described as a case of:

- good policy and operational execution + good communications
- good policy and operational execution + bad communications
- bad policy and operational execution + good communications
- bad policy and operational execution + bad communications

If StratCom is the integration of communications and other actions to inform, persuade or influence audiences in support of NATO objectives, then an evaluation of performance during the ISAF campaign will help illustrate where effort, energy and resources might better be applied to achieve more favourable outcomes in future operations. Part of the answer is considerably more effort, energy and resources from many of the constituent parts of StratCom. Oft forgotten though, but clearly in evidence in these findings, is that the policy, operational execution and StratCom relationship is one that is deeply symbiotic.

These deliberations are all informed by the Strategic Communications Capability and Performance Assessment (SCCAPA), developed for this report. The ISAF mission is considered and evaluated in 69 scored factors in each of four time periods as well as an overall 2003-2014 mission assessment. The methodology will be described, key findings explained, and the scored results compared by time period and by factor group (Policy/Operational Success, Operational Conduct, Afghan Government/Insurgent Behaviour, communications function). Observations that were common to several respondents and two areas

of difference – understanding Afghans, and credibility of NATO forces – are discussed. The factors are ranked in terms of their importance to the campaign, and the Communications Function findings are reviewed further. The tool provides a rich source of measurements to inform observations about *which* grouping of factors within the policy-operations-StratCom triad fared better over the course of the campaign.

“

Often forgotten though, but clearly in evidence in these findings, is that the policy, operational execution and StratCom relationship is one that is deeply symbiotic.

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT (BLUF)

- Assessment factors related to Afghan government and insurgent behaviour score the worst.
- Factors related to desired operational outcomes do not fare well.
- Policy outcomes are mainly negative, and are the most important of the various factors.
- Communications outcomes are mixed overall but tend toward the positive.
- The activities that NATO HQs were responsible for were done sufficiently well. The one activity line that is within their remit that is a notable deficiency is the factor relating to “Comms doctrine and policy was seamless and ‘fit for purpose’”. This is the piece that helps set national doctrine in many countries, and is the basis for the NATO Defence Planning Process that defines national capability.

INTRODUCTION

The catchy sound bite and notion that insurgents were winning the information war if not the actual campaign from the cosy confines of their cave was a theme used by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates,³ counter-insurgency expert David Kilcullen⁴ and riffed on by Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.⁵ These comments were meant as a qualitative pronouncement of the West’s collective communication campaign output and impact, in contrast to adversary efforts that with begrudging admiration were considered to be faster, more focused and more effective.

Many campaign shortcomings have been attributed to the Alliance’s communications effort, particularly that the strategic narrative was not cohesive, consistent or coordinated, it did not accord with the reality on the ground, nor was NATO fast enough at getting its own information and perspective in the public domain. The unsatisfactory situation has been

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3 "And so are we organized properly and particularly, for example, when we're being out-communicated by a guy in a cave?" he lamented during a May 2008 address at the American Academy of Diplomacy. See: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4230>

4 "If bin Laden didn't have access to global media, satellite communications, and the Internet, he'd just be a cranky guy in a cave." Quoted in *The New Yorker*, December 18, 2006.

5 "When it comes to video, we [NATO] are frankly operating in the Stone Age". See <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2007/s071008a.html>

variously attributed to deficiencies of the NATO Public Diplomacy Division,⁶ political staff,⁷ politicians,⁸ military public affairs officers,⁹ commanders,¹⁰ media,¹¹ and even of national communication departments.¹² Less frequently cited as reasons for unsatisfactory communications outcomes are policy failings, inexplicable decisions by NATO nations,¹³ challenges of operational execution, the possibility of sub-par performance by any senior military leaders, or conditions that limited institutional reform like the profound lack of capacity in an Afghan civil society that was rife with corruption. Of course the cause is not so easily attributed to any one thing and is probably “all of the above”. There is a wide range of views and opinions about how effective was ISAF communication efforts, and the reasons for that differ widely, as this sampling from eight military officers from four NATO countries who served in five different vantage points illustrates:¹⁴

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6 See General David Richards, *Taking Command* (2014).

7 "My only real problem with the Bush White House involved its communications/public relations advisors. They were always trying to get me to go on the Sunday TV talk shows, write op-eds, and grant interviews. I considered their perspective and that of Obama's advisers too - to be highly tactical, usually having to do with some hot-button issue of the moment and usually highly partisan." Robert Gates, *Duty*, (2014), p. 95-96.

8 As recounted earlier, during a trip to Afghanistan in April 2006 British Defence Secretary John Reid said, "We're in the south to help and protect the Afghan people to reconstruct their economy and democracy. We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years' time without firing one shot." This quotation was regularly used (and taken out of context) in NATO countries by media to illustrate how politicians overseeing the campaign were out of touch with what was happening in ISAF.

9 "Having described his [Gen McChrystal] overall philosophy, the ISAF commander then got down to specifics, no doubt helped immensely by clever military lawyers and earnest public-affairs flacks who had never heard a shot fired outside of a rifle range. Well, it kept their bright minds clear, if nothing else." Lieutenant-General Dan Bolger, *Why We Lost*, (2014), p. 305

10 General Richards and General McChrystal were two COMISAFs famously "called on the carpet" more than once by military and political authorities for remarks to media, or, particularly, after speaking at military Service Institutes.

11 "Dealing with news people amounted to handling live snakes – not much good came of it. So with the exception of adept Dave Petraeus and a few game if less sure-footed imitators, most generals avoided the news media or fed them pabulum, pre-digested talking point." Bolger (2014), p. 423.

12 The senior-most public servant who headed the Afghanistan file from a unique Whole of Government perspective in Canada during its most ambitious period, offered this view: "Sadly, the communications sections of most government departments have evolved into something that brings to mind Newspeak as practised in the creepy totalitarian state envisioned in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But instead of claiming, like the apparatchiks around Orwell's Big Brother, that "Freedom is Slavery," our departmental communications gurus seem to believe that "Communications is Silence." They are perversely dedicated to *not* communicating." David Mulrone, *Middle Power, Middle Kingdom* (2014), p. 28.

13 For example, the senior British military command was accused of going into Helmand Province with their "eyes closed and their fingers crossed." As an example of how opaque the decision-making process was, when General Sir Mike Jackson, then army Chief was asked by a reporter from *The Times* why the UK military chose to deploy to Helmand instead of to Kandahar Province, he replied, "Search me, guv". See: <http://www.bsix.ac.uk/PDF/bseven/clubs/Journalism/the%20officers%20mess.pdf>

14 Individual interviews and exchanges with officers who served during the second half of the ISAF campaign.

A Public Affairs Colonel: *“That we lost the information campaign is a view shared by observers from a great distance. This misperception comes from a lack of understanding that anyone can get on the Internet, and modern terrorists and insurgents use social media freely. Most media over-credited Taliban efforts simply because they had an Internet presence. We beat the enemy on every channel.”*

A Public Affairs Colonel: *“We were clearly losing but I don’t credit Taliban propaganda for being better than us. It was because the communications environment was so challenging – insider attacks, civilian casualties, President Karzai and his administration messaging against us on multiple issues including special operations, detainee policy and the Bagram detention facility, the use of contractors, and the readiness of the army and police, to name a few.”*

A Deputy Chief of Staff Communications: *“I argued then and still believe NATO was holding steady in its information campaign within Afghanistan, which is all that mattered: we knew Western support was rapidly dwindling and was not our Centre of Gravity anyways, since the troop withdrawals had been announced [Dec 2010]. Holding steady with NATO surveys that suggested at least two-thirds of Afghans supported the mission was a success story, in light of the uncertainty over the future of the Western presence after ISAF was finished, a discredited President of Afghanistan and a highly visible Taliban campaign attacking centres of government power.”*

A Deputy Chief of Staff Communication: *“There were some unrealistic expectations, including that Afghanistan would homogenously transform into a beacon of democracy with a similar perspective on individual rights that we have in the West. Given the realities, we had tremendous impact in some areas and in others less so. Nonetheless, in retrospect, I would not do anything differently or recommend that we do anything differently. What was done was the most appropriate action given the circumstances at the time and we did the best that was possible given the situation.”*

A Public Affairs Colonel: *“The real problem is the unreasonable expectations of some senior leaders. They view information as simply another weapon that can be fired for effect. They are stuck in their own cave, viewing the world through Western eyes of assuming the ‘native peoples’ want the same thing we do. They simply don’t understand the operating environment. They think with a few hard-charging colonels we can sway Afghan public opinion through a few local radio stations and loudspeaker teams. They forget that the guy behind the loud speaker is a Caucasian from Texas.”*

An Info Ops Colonel: *“At the local level with visible, well-funded Afghan security forces and adequate security the information campaign worked well. Here, Afghans accepted the message of increased security because they could see tangible improvements. In remote areas where the Taliban or other insurgent groups dominated, these types of messages did not resonate and had ill effect. Despite what our generals were saying about gaining stability,*

it is hard to promote a security message when so many young Afghans were losing their lives in defence of the government. Additionally, promoting economic opportunities where there clearly weren't any was a difficult task. Messages intended to garner popular support for the Afghan government will not resonate if security remains problematic, there are no employment opportunities, and the judicial system continues to be fraught with corruption and ineptness."

A former Director of the International Military Staff: *"We do not need so-called 'people in caves' to say anything. They can be perfectly silent, and our own media will take upon themselves to highlight any negative aspect of the military campaign or of the political decisions they can set their eyes on, because negative things are more sensational than the positive aspects, and because they honestly believe it is their obligation to express criticism. Carrying out a positive information campaign is much harder than finding holes in it; in other words the fight between our info campaign and our opponents' is not a symmetrical one, and they cannot be weighted on the same scale. Of course, the fact that we find criticism within our own ranks is not bad in itself ...we are a democracy after all."*

A former Military Representative to the NATO Military Committee: *"We had a few successes and some key failures but you can't claim a successful information campaign if the facts on the ground clearly point in the other direction. In the UK, Afghanistan wasn't about NATO, it was about British troops back in Afghanistan, again, without the necessary kit. NATO was scarcely mentioned because there was no need to use it to legitimize the operation, or indeed to find blame. It was about Helmand, just as I suspect to Canadians it was about Kandahar, for Germans it was Kunduz and for the Dutch, Uruzgan. I don't think any Brits really expected 'victory'; they were, vaguely and reluctantly, content that terrorism needed to be rooted out wherever and if Afghanistan was ungoverned space where the festering boil had to be lanced, so be it."*

Or, as a NATO Ambassador observed, "Trying to align all these things is really complicated. Especially since Ambassadors have no idea what is meant by StratCom. There is not one week that goes by without at least one of my colleagues, in all seriousness, saying that 'what we need for this particular activity or that particular development', is a strategic communications plan".¹⁵

To inform a deeper understanding of how communications fared, Table 16 details 69 scored factors to assess the capability and performance of StratCom during the NATO ISAF campaign. About half of these factors provide important situational context that conditioned the information environment. The factors selected were those considered to have the greatest impact on the design, execution and impact of communication and information-related activities.

The assessment of 'what worked well', 'what didn't work as well', and 'why', should help focus effort to identify areas for improvement.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

The StratCom Capability and Performance Assessment (SCCAPA) tool is informed by an extensive interview-based sampling of knowledgeable practitioners and officials with deep experience in the Afghanistan file, supplemented by existing assessments and a variety of related studies and documentation.

The tool was developed and progressively refined following suggestions from nearly a dozen experienced practitioners. An assessment was then completed for each of the 345 data entry points (69 scored factors over four time periods and an overall mission score for 2003-2014 for each factor). Seven other factors relating to Afghan perceptions are included in the Table to illustrate perception-related effects but are not scored, since the data are drawn from existing polls of repute that serve to provide additional context.

The initial scoring was based on this report author's assessment drawn from more than 100 formal and semi-structured interviews; a review of relevant literature including periodicals and texts by key principals; an examination of NATO HQ and ISAF news conference transcripts where available on line (2003-2014); major studies and reports including from RAND, the Asia Foundation, the Congressional Research Service, the United Nations, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, and The Brookings Institution; as well as NATO HQ communication products including Secretary General speeches and engagements, on-line transcripts, Media Operations Centre documentation, NATO TV, Summit and Ministerial information, and the *NATO Review* publication.

A classic Delphi model approach of first soliciting expert views on a blank assessment canvas was not considered viable given the variety of factors examined over five distinct time periods, and the large number of participants solicited. Four criteria informed selection for the participant cohort. All needed to have served a full tour in Afghanistan (at least six months); directly worked on the Afghanistan file at a NATO or national headquarters for at least one year; covered it as media for more than three years; or be a long-standing and recognized national security expert. All were known to have been accomplished in their field and it was expected they would have very informed views about the situation from the time they were directly involved, a particular quality of which the sampling methodology meant to take advantage. Finally, they were also selected on the basis that they remained connected in some way to defence and security following their Afghanistan-related tour or assignment, and thus through work or personal interest would continue to be attuned to developments about the ISAF mission.

A cohort of 30 was selected with returns from 23 participants received in time to be included. The survey incorporates feedback of respondents from Canada, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, United States and United Kingdom. This group represents officials from departments of defence and foreign affairs, the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, civilian contractors and officials who served in theatre, former members of the Military Committee, and military officers from Public Affairs, PSYOPS, Info Ops as well as those who closely associate themselves with StratCom. In this way, an effort was made to secure input from across the full breadth and scope of the mission over the 2003-2014 period, from many different work perspectives and from different nationalities.

Participants were asked to review each of the initial SCCAPA scores and invited to provide feedback, focused on commentary and rationale specifically on why a scoring factor should be rated higher or lower. Where there were any real differences of opinion as to how a factor finding should be scored, it was also compared against the Afghanistan case study (2011, 2013 and 2015) of the RAND series *Counterinsurgency Scorecard* that examined 51 separate factors including five related to strategic communications.¹⁶ The SCCAPA scoring reflects an amalgam of all the aforementioned inputs.

The tool does not include socio-economic indicators such as income, quality of life, under five mortality rate or education. These are obviously important measures of overall progress in the country, and supporting economic development, health and education initiatives was a significant focus of effort for ISAF, particularly through the work of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. It is sufficient for the purposes of this examination to note that the Human Development Index rating for Afghanistan has improved significantly over the course of the ISAF mission;¹⁷ the focus here though, is less about statistical outcomes but on better understanding the factors that directly affected the conduct and quality of the communication effort.

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 16 This is a comprehensive, social science-based assessment of the Afghanistan campaign from the perspective of the counter-insurgency effort overall. See Christopher Paul, *Counterinsurgency Scorecard: Afghanistan in Early 2011 Relative to the Insurgencies of the Past 30 Years* (2011, RAND), plus 2013 and 2015 updates. It includes assessment of five strategic communications factors: COIN force and government actions consistent with messages (delivering on promises); COIN force maintains credibility with population in the area of conflict; messages/themes coherent with overall COIN approach; themes and messages coordinated for all involved government agencies; Earnest Info Ops/PSYOPS/StratCom/messaging effort.

17 In 2006 (the earliest inclusion of the country in the findings by UNDP), Afghanistan ranked 181 out of 182 countries surveyed, ahead of Niger and behind Sierra Leone. In 2014, Afghanistan ranked 169/187, just ahead of Djibouti and just behind Haiti. UNDP, *Human Development Report 2009* (sic), and *Human Development Index, 2014*.

DEFINING THE TIME PERIODS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Many distinct operational phases can be differentiated in a campaign that was commanded by 16 different generals (13 being NATO COMISAFs) from seven nations. Considering the campaign as one block of time provides defensible overall conclusions, but reducing the entirety of the ISAF effort to just that is less helpful in terms of understanding how the constituent elements fared throughout in the first place. It also makes it difficult to discriminate between the importance of various factors at different points in time. To the extent possible we should wish to have additional insight into the major factors at play that served to establish the conditions and set many of the terms and constraints that governed communications at key points. In addition to the 2003-2014 period, the campaign is considered in four distinct time periods:

NATO leads ISAF - Expansion thru Afghanistan (Aug 2003 - Oct 2006).

This period is characterized by the introduction of UN-mandated, NATO-led forces to help secure Kabul and the immediate environs following the defeat of the Taliban and the sequenced roll-out of the mission to the whole of the country. The transition of RC (South) to NATO command in summer 2006 and later that year to RC (East) brought to the fore that the insurgency was not beaten but very much alive and well, and that Alliance forces were woefully under-resourced for the mission. This period was dominated by issues around the suitability of military equipment, force levels, their composition and their employment. Military nomenclature including ‘force generation’ and ‘national caveats’ – restrictions on the use of a particular force or its assets – became public watchwords. Heavy criticism was levelled at countries that were not actively engaged in fighting, particularly in RC (South).

Riga Summit - McChrystal Report (Nov 2006 - Aug 2009). Thus armed from the Riga Summit with offers on paper of additional forces and the elimination or reduction of some national caveats, NATO entered 2007 with 37 troop contributing nations and 35,000 forces under command, rising to 41,000 by early spring but staying at that level into December. By the end of 2008, there were still just 51,000 under command, about 40 percent of the force size there would be three years later. As the insurgency intensified, the worsening security situation put at risk the reconstruction, development and capacity building efforts, including building capability in the Afghan National Security Forces. NATO was stumbling badly, on the back foot militarily and haemorrhaging credibility. Modest efforts were made to ‘mini-surge’, primarily with U.S. forces to try to arrest the slide and regain the initiative in ISAF’s favour, especially in the lead-up to the critical 2009 Afghan Presidential elections.

McChrystal Command - AFG Forces Take Security Lead for Country. (Sep 2009 - Jun 2013). The surge was part of a major effort led by COMISAF General Stanley McChrystal to fundamentally reset the mission with a much more explicit, pronounced emphasis on population-centric counter-insurgency than had been the case before. Notwithstanding, during this period the number of troops-in-contact, NATO casualties and civilian casualties grew as insurgent activity metastasized and as the additional NATO forces moved into areas previously patrolled but not secured. Training support for the ANSF became a major focus of effort, in preparation for the army and police to take the lead for security in the country. An operational command was created, for the first time creating a division of responsibilities that allowed the strategic ISAF HQ to focus its efforts ‘up and out’ to President Karzai, his most senior ministers, and to NATO/national audiences. The three-star ISAF Joint Command (IJC) focused ‘down and in’, prosecuting the campaign, and working with key leaders and influential personalities within and outside Government throughout the country. This period also marked a major reorganization of the communication and information functions, a significant up-scaling of its capability and a dramatic increase in resources, contracted and otherwise. Here is where ‘NATO strategic communications’ legitimately marked its operational debut.

NATO Forces Draw Down - ISAF Mission End. (Jul 2013 - Dec 2014). This period is characterized by a concerted effort by NATO to fully transition lead for security responsibilities to Afghan National Security Forces. NATO’s own force levels started to draw down while concurrently continuing to build indigenous Afghan capacity, including within the government communication and information-related field.

SCORING

The assessment lists 76 factors of direct relevance to communications, with 69 scored and seven assigned values using reputable polling data to gauge Afghan opinion. The Yes-Mixed-No outcome indicates the extent to which that factor was present and/or satisfied over the period. A score of Yes in a factor indicates a range from a quite satisfactory to an excellent outcome (6.5-10 on a scale of 0-10). A Mixed outcome indicates the factor had some but limited success, scoring moderately (4-6). A score of No reflects a view that the factor was absent or represented a range from a very unsatisfactory situation, to an unsatisfactory outcome (0-3.5). Importantly, scoring is not a judgement of effort but a snapshot of impact, outcome and effect of the factor during that period of time.

It takes into account the time, place and circumstances of the Afghan state, applying realistic expectations using an Afghan, not Western baseline, conscious of General Petraeus' admonition that "We're not trying to turn Afghanistan into Switzerland; we're not trying to make it into an advanced, Western, industrialized democracy in the next few years."¹⁸

There was broad agreement amongst respondents about the assessment factors and the distinctive time periods. A consensus view about what constitutes success or failure in such a broad range of activities with this wide a span of endeavour was not expected, and the results bore that out. There is empirical evidence aplenty to support almost any reasonable view ardently held, and while these findings represent a considerable body of collective experience, it is ultimately a subjective assessment.

Not every line of activity lends itself well to precisely accounting for trends over a time period that may be years long and represent several different command periods. There will also be considerable variance in some categories when applied to different provinces in Afghanistan, such as "fear for personal or family safety". Survey participants who served in ISAF were assigned to RC (South), RC (East) and/or Kabul, and many visited other regions but they did not necessarily work there. Ultimately, the mission was defined by the capital and where security concerns were most pronounced so the place of service by respondents suits the evaluation purposes well. The values assigned recognized *the worst-case scenario*. For example, even if the counter-narcotics effort was proceeding well or relatively well in most parts of the country but not in RC (South), then RC (South) would be the determining score. Isolated incidents in one province would not be enough to raise or lower an entire score; instead the score represents a best assessment of that factor from across the country during that time period.

Overall Mission scores are not simply an average of the four time period scores – two "No's" and two "Yes's" don't necessarily equate to a "Mixed". Each was considered independently, with a Mission Overall score for a factor that featured a range of scores over a time period, and were deduced based on the overall impact of that factor on the communication and information campaign. The challenge of coming to terms with an overall score is illustrated by the factor, 'President Karzai and Cabinet overtly supported ISAF mission', which scored Yes during the initial phase and declined significantly from about half way through the campaign. President Karzai's pronouncements from

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 18 Interview in January 2010. See <http://www.newsweek.com/general-petraeus-nation-building-afghanistan-77863>

about 2010-on seriously damaged public support for the mission with NATO domestic audiences and thus could easily have been rated Low overall. The factor receives a Mixed rating (and on the low rather than the high side of Mixed), only because senior Cabinet members were publicly more supportive than the President, and in the end, notwithstanding the many perturbations the situation did not degrade to the point where ISAF was expressly told it was no longer wanted and asked to leave the country. The factors were also grouped in four categories in order to compare and contrast findings amongst them, the codes referring to:

PI: Policy/Operational Success Indicator (n=14)

OC: Operational Conduct of Mission (18)

AB: Afghan Government/Insurgent Behaviour (13)

CF: Communications Function Activity (24)

FINDINGS

Table 12: Overall Performance Scoring Results by Campaign Period

		YES	MIXED	NO
Aug 2003 - Oct 2006:	NATO Leads ISAF - Expansion Thru AFG	5	20	44
Nov 2006 - Aug 2009:	Riga Summit - McChrystal Report	3	10	56
Sep 2009 - Jun 2013:	McChrystal Command - AFG Has Security Lead	9	36	24
Jul 2013 - Dec 2014:	NATO Draws Down - ISAF Mission End	19	31	19
Aug 2003 - Dec 2014:	Mission Overall	7	28	34

Table 13: Overall Performance Scoring Results, by Category

	FACTORS	YES	MIXED	NO
PI: Policy/Operational Success Indicator	14	2	5	7
OC: Operational Conduct of Mission	18	0	6	12
AB: Afghan Government/Insurgent Behaviour	13	0	2	11
CF: Communications Function Activity and Execution	24	5	15	4
TOTAL	69	7	28	34

Table 14: Overall Performance Scoring Results by Category and by Time Period

	FACTORS	2003-06 (Y/M/N)	2006-09 (Y/M/N)	2009-13 (Y/M/N)	2013-14 (Y/M/N)
PI: Policy/ Operational Success Indicator	14	4/7/3	2/2/10	2/6/6	5/4/5
OC: Operational Conduct of Mission	18	0/7/11	0/0/18	2/9/7	5/8/5
AB: Afghan Government/ Insurgent Behaviour	13	1/7/5	0/1/12	0/6/7	2/5/6
CF: Communications Function Activity and Execution	24	0/10/14	1/8/15	5/15/4	7/14/3
TOTAL	69	5/31/33	3/11/55	9/36/24	19/31/19

Comparing Time Periods (Table 12)

The first phase of the NATO-led ISAF campaign (2003-06) scored better than the second phase (2006-09). This is attributed to a relatively small operational area during 2003-06 for the better part of the time in question, and a series of effective commands during key periods including Lieutenant-Generals Gliemerth and Hillier. The ARRC tour in 2006 certainly ranks amongst the top commands, if not at the top, given the challenges associated with the mission at the time including expanding the area of responsibility and the first NATO-led ground fight of the Alliance's history. While that obviously did not prove decisive, it was instrumental in demonstrating Alliance resolve, starting to initiate a broader effort with Afghan ministries to build capability therein, and to buy time to eventually scale up the rest of the mission. The approach to influence-led operations, advanced thinking for the time, and the effort at a comprehensive approach and priority setting including through the Policy Action Group all strengthened outcomes, including for StratCom.

Almost all areas show a decline in desirable outcomes during the period characterised by the commands of Generals McNeill and McKiernan. As discussed in Chapter 4, NATO forces in theatre were a fraction of what had been requested and the comprehensive approach favoured by General Richards gave way to a more robust and kinetic operation prosecuted under General MacNeill, though less so by General McKiernan who tried to turn the tide but few were paying attention to Afghanistan at the time, and by mid-2009 the

impacts of the worsened security situation were being felt across all lines of operation.¹⁹ Still, the communications component factors during this period are unchanged from the period before, which may suggest that in spite of the overall situation worsening, the communications-related investments at NATO HQ and in the field including at the Senior Civilian Representative's Office in Kabul were having effect.

A very considerable difference shows in the third period (2009-2013). This is the longest of the time periods, and obviously benefited from the very significant increase in resources, a focus on Afghanistan over Iraq, a renewed sense of effort and purpose by all nations, and a succession of highly experienced commanders attuned to the importance of building Afghan capacity and the place of information and communication in a classic counter-insurgency campaign. By the last period, impact indicators are up significantly, and not unexpectedly given the effort and investment made in the country by that point. Still, one-quarter of the factors scored No, illustrating the scale and scope of the challenge remaining.

Comparing Categories (Table 13)

Overall, a significant percentage of factors, almost half (34/69), were assessed as No, or having quite unsatisfactory outcomes over the course of the mission. A little more than 10% were judged to be Yes, meaning a relative success, though no factors related to Operational Conduct or Afghan Government/Insurgent Behaviour. The latter scored the worst of all categories (11/13 being No, or about 85%), which is disconcerting *given these factors were essentially what the mission was ostensibly all about*. This is clear evidence that economic and security conditions were bad and either the PSYOPS and Info Ops campaigns designed to influence and change behaviours was deficient, or more likely, that NATO (and the international community) was not sufficiently aware and alert to the many influencers that informed those behaviours. It suggests a very poor understanding of NATO's adversaries and of the mainstream audiences it meant to support, a conclusion that would seem to be borne out by the findings that the intelligence function was almost entirely focused on inputs for kinetic target selection.²⁰ From a StratCom perspective, 12/18 or two-thirds of the

19 As famously expressed by Admiral Mullen in December 2007 before the House Armed Services Committee when he said, "Our main focus militarily, in the region and in the world right now is rightly and firmly in Iraq. It is simply a matter of resources, of capacity. In Afghanistan we do what we can. In Iraq we do what we must."

20 "Eight years into the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy. Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade." Major General Michael Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger, and Paul Batchelor. *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, Center for a New American Security, January 2010, p. 7.

factors relating to operational conduct, were sub-optimal. These factors are critical to prosecuting a good communication campaign, and indicates that a considerable amount of time was spent reacting and responding to bad events and bad outcomes. Indicators related to policy or operational success scored No in 7/14 factors, or 50% of the time. The communication factors fare considerably better, with 20/24 or 81% realising at least a mixed score.

Comparing Category Results by Period (Table 14)

Overall, the mission began reasonably well in the first phase from a policy and operational outcomes perspective even if enormously challenged, but suffered from weak communications capacity and capability in the field, at ISAF and at NATO HQ. This overall situation worsened from 2006-2009 with the communications campaign starting to falter, a function of a serious shortage of staff, and of trained practitioners who despite best efforts were being driven almost exclusively by a requirement to respond to bad events of the day. By 2006-07, the operational pace of the two largest force contributors to ISAF started to bite hard, with even the public affairs function – the ‘easiest’ to recruit and train amongst the communication and information-related capabilities – being seriously under-staffed.²¹

Participant Feedback on Factor Scoring

As anticipated, respondent feedback reflected a high degree of familiarity and understanding of the time of their direct involvement in the mission. On balance, more of them made a case to raise the report author’s initial scores for factors in the period in which they had served, than made a case to lower them. This accords with a view that experiencing the mission from the inside provides a more contextualised understanding than does simply observing from outside. There were considerably more points of commonality amongst respondents than there were differences. The five most notable points of agreement that several respondents said had influenced their scoring included:

- All too often the sheer volume or ‘weight of fire’ of activity, output and product was the performance measure, not the impact or effect.

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 21 One non-American senior public affairs officer who liaised with NATO forces but served with Combined Forces Command - Afghanistan at the time recalls that "the truth is that the U.S. forces were nearly exhausted at this point. Individual soldiers were more like automatons counting the days rather than keenly engaged in the fight. Many troops were on their third or fourth tour and many I encountered had come to Afghanistan voluntarily to avoid a third or fourth tour in Iraq. They were in the process of bringing Naval and Air Force personnel into theatre often for the first time, so Afghanistan was a real eye-opener for them." [Personal communication].

- For instance, one respondent who worked at CJPOTF made clear that superiors were very focused on ‘how many newspapers have been produced and shipped’, ‘how many radio spots per hour were aired, and how many per day,’ but whether Afghans were reading or listening and whether that contributed anything specific to the campaign was of less interest. This raises a valuable point about measuring effect. As a long-time observer of Afghanistan explained, the product output may not have had the desired effect of reducing undesirable behaviour, and it may not have been excellent programming but particularly in the early years, it was programming in a time and space where there was very little to be had. ISAF filling that space led to “an awakening of the population and enabled them to have and to want more information,” and was a catalyst in the early years for a competitive Afghan media – a tremendous outcome yet a difficult effect to account for and attribute to ISAF.
- Those respondents who were in place for more than one six-month tour experienced a high degree of change of priority and focus of effort as command staff rotated, in some cases that being like “night and day.” The communication effort may have been shaped by an overarching Operational Plan, principles and intent but in actual, practical terms the campaign was more like a series of six-month or one-year iterations rather than a continuous engagement featuring any real continuity of effort.
- What NATO was telling Afghans did not accord with Afghans’ experience which was on balance a high degree of insecurity, the malicious effects of corruption, and the lack of employment prospects. As a result, Taliban threats and actions to intimidate were effective.
- There was a tremendous disparity in staff ability amongst practitioners within the communication and information-related communities at every rank level. Many respondents commented on the impact on their operations of working for, with, or in charge of others who came from trades or classifications with no previous affiliation or training even remotely associated with communications, from the level of captain up to and including brigadier-general.
- There was less engagement with the UN and other international agencies and bodies than officials and practitioners in theatre expected there would be, particularly given the role of the UN.

From commentary received, there were only minor differences of opinion and after adjusting scores where good additional information was brought to bear, no one factor stood out as being a definite Yes to someone's definite No, or vice versa. The only two points of real difference of all the factors was one of degree and intensity of opinion, related to the extent to which NATO understood the Afghan population, and whether the NATO force was credible with Afghans. On this there were two fixed camps, with several advocating for a No across the board for all periods and a clear expression that in this respect, NATO had clearly failed. This view was particularly pronounced in respondents who had spent considerable time 'outside the wire', and generally, the more time spent outside military compounds, the stronger the case was for a No. Others acknowledged real deficiencies including an over-reliance on attitudinal polling, but pointed to initiatives like the Atmospherics program, the use of local Afghan hires, long-term international consultants, forward media teams at the Regional Command, and the target audience analysis cell as worthwhile initiatives that provided real insight.

Some respondents also said that findings did not necessarily inform product and output because senior command staff "didn't believe it," and if the Operations two-star boss wanted communication efforts to focus on directly reaching insurgent forces as a priority (which staff advised against based on target audience analysis), then that is what happened.

How then, to account for the support of Afghans as evidenced by polling figures that seem consistently, unreasonably high? Some respondents saw this as validation of positive campaign outcomes. Others attributed polling results to the propensity of the population to tell surveyors what they thought they wanted to hear and an over-reliance on attitudinal surveys with its inherent biases ("if you were being surveyed by someone with a clipboard, would you think it was the government/NATO or the Taliban?" noted a respondent). Overall though, the scoring outcome in the 'Understand Function' factor is an area that should give operational campaign plan designers pause for thought.

Comparing Factors

The previous discussion provided observations about groups of equally weighted factors and time periods, but not about the relative value of individual factors. Of course, some factors clearly are more important and have greater impact on the mission and the communications campaign than others, and as it turns out further insights are possible when factors are compared to each other. The following is a list of all 69 scored factors arranged in order of importance within each of the three Yes-Mixed-No scoring ranges, highlighting the top five in each category.

These are the factors that would have the greatest overall impact on the mission given an opportunity to turn a factor from a No to a Mixed or a Yes, or from a Mixed to a Yes. Of course, determining the ‘most important’ in a range such as this is an inexact science: the point is to try to elucidate as reasonably as possible which lines of activity are inherently more important to realizing better outcomes, all others being held equal. For instance, in the list of factors that scored No, turning the ‘counter-narcotics security sector reform effort’ into a Yes, would be much more conducive to better overall outcomes than turning the No of the ‘CJPOTF billboard campaign’ to a Yes. And, turning ‘cross-border infiltration and insurgent support was minimized’ to Yes would lead to better campaign outcomes than if ‘in-theatre imagery collection and distribution’ was indeed sufficient. Here is how the list shapes up, by importance within each of the three scoring categories, first with the factors that were assessed as being successful over the course of the campaign:

CF 9	National hometown outreach programs	Yes
CF 19	PDD comms output and products had impact & real effect	Yes
CF 4	Overarching NATO HQ themes/messages integrated in comms	Yes
CF 3	NATO HQ (Brussels) narrative was consistent	Yes
PI 13	Public opinion was supportive of the nations’ armed forces	Yes
PI 14	Overt public protest/political recriminations were minimal	Yes
CF 21	Good Return on Investment (RoI): stakeholder visits from nations to AFG	Yes

Five of the seven relate to the communications function, and it seems clear that the success of the top four factors had a direct and positive bearing on public opinion in NATO and partner troop contributing nations. No factors related to policy or operational outcomes makes this list.

PI 3	Alliance military strategic centre of gravity was realised	Mixed
PI 2	Alliance political centre of gravity was achieved	Mixed
PI 5	Afghan National Army Security Sector Reform	Mixed
OC 2	UN effort was effective overall	Mixed
OC 3	ISAF was major national effort for key troop TCN governments	Mixed
OC 16	ISAF was major factor at enhancing AFG government comms ability	Mixed
AB 5	Afghan government could easily communicate with population	Mixed
OC 14	<i>StratCom as mindset informed the work of the ISAF command</i>	<i>Mixed</i>

PI 10	NATO force was credible with the Afghan population	Mixed
CF 6	Coord of comms: NATO HQ political-military & SHAPE, down to ISAF	Mixed
CF 2	NATO military HQs info output had quality and impact	Mixed
CF 7	Coord of comms within theatre: ISAF HQ to Regional Command HQs	Mixed
CF 20	NATO HQ comms effort was well connected to national efforts	Mixed
CF 12	Communication-related resources in theatre were sufficient	Mixed
AB 3	President Karzai and Cabinet overtly supported ISAF mission	Mixed
CF 1	NATO military HQs narrative was consistent	Mixed
OC 5	NATO avoided AFG civilian casualties and disproportionate actions	Mixed
CF 18	SECGEN + key NATO officials outreach efforts were effective	Mixed
CF 13	Senior practitioners were trained, and experienced in function	Mixed
CF 10	Comms doctrine and policy was seamless + 'fit for purpose'	Mixed
CF 23	Comms lessons learned were captured/integrated/shared	Mixed
CF 24	Imagery realizing strategic objectives was distributed	Mixed
PI 12	Public opinion was supportive of the ISAF mission	Mixed
OC 8	Sufficient NATO military forces deployed to theatre	Mixed
CF 14	Electronic (Radio, TV, SMS, Social Media) were effective	Mixed
CF 22	Good RoI: stakeholder visits from AFG to NATO	Mixed
CF 5	SHAPE StratCom Frameworks regularly used in comms	Mixed
CF 15	Print (Newspaper, Magazines) were effective	Mixed

Of interest in this series is the relative importance of an attribute like StratCom mindset, and how activity lines that help build capability and capacity in indigenous Government ministries fare against other factors with a similar score. For example, it is not hard to deduce what outcomes would stem from turning 'SECGEN + key NATO officials outreach efforts' from Mixed to Yes – perhaps the elimination of a few more minor caveats or a few hundred or even a few more thousand forces 1, or even 2 years earlier than was the case. All other factors being equal, that does not match the expected outcome from improving the ability of the Afghan Government to be able to more effectively communicate with its citizens 1, or 2 years earlier.

PI 1	Alliance political end-state was realised	No
OC 1	Comprehensive Approach was implemented and effective	No
PI 7	Counter-narcotics Security Sector Reform	No
PI 4	Afghan National Police Security Sector Reform	No
AB 2	AFG national government was competent and improving	No
OC 6	NATO had good understanding of AFG people + issues	No
OC 4	OEF avoided AFG civilian casualties and disproportionate actions	No
AB 12	Cross-border infiltration & insurgent support was minimized	No
OC 11	<i>Target Audience Analysis was effective</i>	No
PI 8	Counter-corruption Security Sector Reform	No
AB 13	Counter-narcotics program was supported by population	No
AB 9	Ability of insurgents to influence population was diminished	No
CF 11	NATO TCNs had sufficient, trained info-related capabilities	No
OC 12	ISAF actions consistent with words: no 'say-do' gap	No
AB 1	AFG provincial governments were competent and improving	No
AB 10	Ability to influence legitimate governance was neutralized	No
PI 6	Rule of Law/Justice Security Sector Reform	No
AB 4	Insurgency strength and effect was notably reduced	No
OC 7	Unity of Purpose, Unity of Command principles in force	No
OC 9	Sufficient national civilian resources deployed to theatre	No
PI 11	NATO TCNs narratives consistent & aligned with NATO	No
OC 15	J2 Intelligence actively supported the communication effort	No
AB 6	Afghan government was effective at taking communications lead	No
OC 10	Sufficient research and analysis to understand Afghans and their needs	No
PI 9	Realistic objectives for the military mission were defined	No
AB 8	Reintegration of insurgents was successful	No
OC 17	IOs (including the UN) communicated effectively about their work	No
AB 7	Insurgents/malign actors had <u>ineffective</u> Info Ops campaign	No
AB 11	Morale and cohesion of insurgents was undermined	No
OC 13	NATO TCNs actions were consistent with their words	No
OC 18	Operation Enduring Freedom communications were effective	No
CF 8	In-theatre imagery collection & distribution was sufficient	No

CF 17	Traditional Communications activities were effective	No
CF 16	CJPOTF billboard campaign was effective	No

In the No-scored factors, there is a heavy concentration of non-communications related activities near the top, and a concentration of communications activities at the bottom. Of particular interest and a key take-away is that turning a No to a Yes in the ‘Target Audience Analysis’ factor leading to understanding Afghans better, by this ranking would have had important first-, second- and third order effects for policy development, and execution of operations, with impacts on adversary (and population) behaviours.

Following the evaluations of all factors by group and time period is one last assessment which is a ranking from most to least important to the ISAF campaign of all 24 communications-related factors. This assessment was not subject to review by the StratCom Capability and Performance Assessment participants, but is this report author’s view based on the ISAF findings to date. This overview helps when considering whether NATO HQ, NATO military authorities, and NATO members and partners’ communication and information-related capabilities are indeed fit for purpose for contemporary operations. The top 10 most important factors are highlighted.

CF 9	National hometown outreach programs
CF 11	NATO TCNs had sufficient, trained info-related capabilities
CF 19	PDD comms output and products had impact & real effect
CF 13	Senior practitioners were trained, and experienced in function
CF 2	NATO military HQs info output had quality and impact
CF 8	In-theatre imagery collection & distribution was sufficient
CF 3	NATO HQ (Brussels) narrative was consistent
CF 1	NATO military HQs narrative was consistent
CF 6	Coord of comms: NATO HQ political-military & SHAPE, down to ISAF
CF 12	Communication and information-related resources in theatre were sufficient
CF 10	Comms doctrine and policy was seamless + ‘fit for purpose’
CF 17	Traditional Communications activities were effective
CF 7	Coord of comms within theatre: ISAF HQ to Regional Command HQs
CF 14	Electronic (Radio, TV, SMS, Social Media) were effective [In ISAF]
CF 5	SHAPE StratCom Frameworks regularly used in comms

CF 20	NATO HQ comms effort was well connected to national efforts
CF 18	SECGEN + key NATO officials outreach efforts were effective
CF 4	Overarching NATO HQ themes/messages integrated in comms
CF 23	Comms lessons learned were captured/integrated/shared
CF 24	Imagery realizing strategic objectives was distributed
CF 22	Good RoI: stakeholder visits from AFG to NATO
CF 15	Print (Newspaper, Magazines) were effective
CF 21	Good RoI: stakeholder visits from nations to AFG
CF 16	CJPOTF billboard campaign was effective

Delving further, the factors with an asterisk (*) are those for which NATO HQ had or has lead responsibility. Of the top 10 factors, NATO HQs had/have the lead responsibility for five of them, and nations have the lead for five.

CF 9	National hometown outreach program	YES
CF 11	NATO TCNs had sufficient, trained info-related capabilities	NO
*CF 19	PDD comms output and products had impact & real effect	YES
CF 13	Senior practitioners were trained, and experienced in function	MIXED
*CF 2	NATO military HQs info output had quality and impact	MIXED
CF 8	In-theatre imagery collection & distribution was sufficient	NO
*CF 3	NATO HQ (Brussels) narrative was consistent	YES
*CF 1	NATO military HQs narrative was consistent	MIXED
*CF 6	Coord of comms: NATO HQ political-military & SHAPE, down to ISAF	MIXED
CF 12	Communication and information-related resources in theatre were sufficient	MIXED

This shows that of the most important communications aspects for the ISAF campaign, those that NATO were most responsible for scored a Yes, Yes, Mixed, Mixed, Mixed and those that nations led scored Yes, Mixed, Mixed, No, No. Nations have the lead for the most important aspects of the communication campaign (the actual forces and capabilities). What is troubling is that nations are responsible for the most important factors, and in this regard the performance scores are on the low range. The activities that NATO HQs were responsible for were done sufficiently well.

The one activity line that is within their remit and is a significant deficiency is CF 10 (Comms doctrine and policy was seamless + ‘fit for purpose’). This is the piece that helps set national doctrine in many countries and is the basis for the NATO Defence Planning Process that defines national capability. These findings suggest that the information environment and operating environment are changing faster than nations have been able or willing to evolve structures and capabilities, leading to the observation of a growing capability gap between NATO HQ and nations’ efforts.

CONCLUSION

Even by the most charitable of assessments, Afghanistan does not appear to be a textbook case study of a ‘good policy and operational execution + good communications’ model (43/45 non-communications factors scored No or Mixed, and 5/24 of the communications factors score Yes).

A finding of ‘bad policy and operational execution + bad communications seems equally unlikely, though perhaps not as obviously why. If the communication effort was ineffective we might expect to see one or more of the following in a number of troop contributing countries: widespread protest at forces being deployed; public dismay over the Afghanistan mission leading to ‘a call to action’ or substantively contributing as a factor in electoral defeat; the resignation of major political figures as a consequence of public discontent; nations threatening the withdrawal of forces or doing so *en masse*; a lack of international commitment to continue to commit forces including to the Resolute Support mission, or to do so mainly in exchange for financial inducements (a tactic used by U.S. to encourage contributions to the coalition effort in Iraq); a retrenchment or withdrawal from engaging in other armed conflict; or even widespread national angst about its military, including calls for deep institutional reform such as in the U.S. following Vietnam or in France following Algeria.

These outcomes have not happened. Nations for the most part stuck to commitments and were in for the long game. Switzerland, with its contribution of two attached to the German Provincial Reconstruction Team, was the first to withdraw in 2008 over concern that the mission had become “a peace enforcement operation rather than a peacekeeping duty.”²²

They were followed by the Dutch in August 2010, the French in November 2012 after a series of insurgent attacks,²³ and the Canadians in March 2014, after 12 years in country. The Dutch government, a coalition, fell in February 2010 over a disagreement between the leading political parties about what and whether to continue to contribute. No other NATO or partner government looks to have been defeated as a result of participating in the Afghanistan mission and little sense of public outrage manifested itself through significant protests or by Ministers being fired.²⁴ Senior-level military resignations or firings were few and far between, even if those of Generals McKiernan and McChrystal happened to be well publicised.

In the UK – arguably the most vociferous of all the NATO troop contributing nations about the mission – in spite of very serious public criticism by senior British political and military leadership of the British strategy during the ISAF campaign there is no call for a Chilcot-style Inquiry (as of December 2015, still examining the Iraq War) for the Afghanistan campaign, nor does there seem to be any serious call for one in any country. That public support for the ISAF mission started to seriously degrade in many NATO nations was a result of a panoply of factors.²⁵ Drawing a conclusion this was because “the communication and information campaign was failing” falls victim to a condition that frequently affects military and civilian leaders when faced with unhappy outcomes: blaming communications for not being able to turn ‘bad’ into ‘good’. Sometimes, the most effective effort and effect possible is turning ‘bad’ into ‘less bad’. That is particularly true in contested military campaigns when a better test of overall communication performance often is less about how well promoted are a series of good news activities, but rather how damage from a succession of bad news events has been mitigated.

.....
 23 Since then, France has taken a lead in difficult and challenging military operations in Africa including against Boko Haram, as well as in Libya during NATO's Operation Unified Protector thus it would be entirely incorrect to attribute the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan as criticism of its will to deploy and use military force.

24 In Canada, two defence ministers were moved from their portfolios in large measure due their handling of the Afghan detainee file. In 2002 the Minister of National Defence made an inaccurate claim that Canadian special operating forces had not taken Afghans prisoner when photographic evidence in a national media outlet proved otherwise. Later, in 2007, another defence minister was shuffled following stumbles over the application of the detainee policy. And, in 2009, then-Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper forced a general election rather than give in to a House of Commons motion to produce documents relating to Afghan detainees. In Germany, three officials including the Chief of Defence eventually resigned in the aftermath of the Kunduz tanker bombing incident in 2009.

25 A good descriptions of the factors at play is found in de Graff, Dimitriu and Ringsmose (2015), and Auerswald and Saideman (2014).

A ‘good policy and operational execution + bad communications’ finding accords better outcomes to the former components and worse outcomes to the latter than the SCCAPA results indicate. ‘Bad policy and operational execution + good communications’ likely understates the effect and effort of a decade’s worth of investment in Afghanistan, and overstates the valuation of the communication effort. All

will have a view, and perhaps the reality is somewhere in between: a policy and operational execution effort that bogged down under the weight of complexity, resources (at least in the first half of the campaign), and a drive for immediate results but through aggregation of effort over time showed positive results.

The assessment demonstrates that ISAF was a case of a fundamentally flawed political/command structure that was by its structural nature incapable of devising and directing a unified political-military campaign. Good operational outcomes make it a whole lot easier to realize what leaders would agree is a successful communications effort. This chapter’s findings lead us to conclude that better StratCom on its own does not erase the outcomes of bad policy and poor operational execution. In the end, StratCom wasn’t nearly what it could have been, but was considerably better than it was given credit for. Where policy and operations were well connected and showed results, StratCom amplified that effect. Where policy and operations outcomes were weak, negative outcomes could be mitigated but not overcome.

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This chapter’s findings lead us to conclude that better StratCom on its own does not erase the outcomes of bad policy and poor operational execution. In the end, StratCom wasn’t nearly what it could have been, but was considerably better than it was given credit for. Where policy and operations were well connected and showed results, StratCom amplified that effect. Where policy and operations outcomes were weak, negative outcomes could be mitigated but not overcome.

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Table 15: NATO ISAF StratCom Capability and Performance Assessment

OVERALL MISSION CONTEXT						
CODE	FACTOR	NATO leads ISAF - Expansion thru AFG Aug 2003 - Oct 2006	Riga Summit - McChrystal Report Nov 2006 - Aug 2009	McChrystal Command - AFG Has Security Lead Sep 2009 - Jun 2013	NATO Draws Down - ISAF Mission End Jul 2013 - Dec 2014	Mission Overall Aug 2003 - Dec 2014
OUTCOME						
PI 1	Alliance Objectives¹	No	No	No	No	No
PI 2	Alliance political end-state was realised	Mixed	No	Mixed	Yes	Mixed
PI 3	Alliance political centre of gravity was achieved	Mixed	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
PI 3	Alliance military strategic centre of gravity was realised					
OC 1	Operating Environment					
OC 2	Comprehensive Approach was implemented and effective	Mixed	No	No	No	No
OC 3	UN effort was effective overall ²	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
OC 3	ISAF was major national effort for key troop 'TCN governments' ³	Mixed	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
AB 1	Afghan provincial governments were competent and improving	No	No	No	Mixed	No
AB 2	Afghan national government was competent and improving	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	No
AB 3	President Karzai and Cabinet overtly supported ISAF mission	Yes	Mixed	No	No	Mixed
PI 4	Security Sector Reform (outcome considering time and place)⁴:					
PI 5	Afghan National Police ⁵	No	No	No	Mixed	No
PI 6	Afghan National Army	Mixed	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
PI 7	Rule of Law/Justice Sector	No	No	No	No	No
PI 7	Counter-narcotics	No	No	No	No	No
PI 8	Counter-corruption	No	No	No	No	No
AB 4	Key ISAF Mission Factors					
OC 4	Insurgency strength and effect was notably reduced	Mixed	No	Mixed	No	No
OC 4	OEF avoided civilian casualties & disproportionate actions ⁶	No	No	No	Mixed	No
OC 5	NATO avoided civilian casualties & disproportionate actions ⁷	Mixed	No	Mixed	Yes	Mixed
OC 6	NATO had good understanding of AFG people + issues	No	No	No	No	No
THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE FORCE						
PI 9	Application of Key Principles of Military Operations⁸					
OC 7	Realistic objectives for the military mission were defined	No	No	Mixed	Yes	No
OC 7	Unity of Purpose, Unity of Command principles in force	Mixed	No	Mixed	Yes	No
PI 10	NATO force was credible with the Afghan population	Yes	No	Mixed	Yes	Mixed

OVERALL MISSION CONTEXT

OVERALL MISSION CONTEXT		NATO leads ISAF - Expansion thru AFG Aug 2003 - Oct 2006	Riga Summit - McChrystal Report Nov 2006 - Aug 2009	McChrystal Command - AFG Has Security Lead Sep 2009 - Jun 2013	NATO Draws Down - ISAF Mission End Jul 2013 - Dec 2014	Mission Overall Aug 2003 - Dec 2014
CODE	FACTOR	OUTCOME				
OC 8	Overall Resourcing of ISAF Mission	No	No	Yes	Yes	Mixed
OC 9	Sufficient NATO military forces deployed to theatre Sufficient national civilian resources deployed to theatre	No	No	No	No	No
OC 10	Understand Function	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	No
OC 11	Sufficient quality research and analysis to understand Afghans and their needs was invested ⁹ Target Audience Analysis was effective	No	No	Mixed	No	No
CF 1	NATO Narrative, Messaging, Delivery ¹⁰	Mixed	No	Mixed	Yes	Mixed
CF 2	NATO military HQs narrative was consistent ¹¹	Mixed	No	Mixed	Yes	Mixed
OC 12	NATO military HQs info output had quality and impact ¹²	Mixed	No	Mixed	Mixed	No
CF 3	ISAF actions consistent with words: no 'say-do' gap	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Yes	Yes
PI 11	NATO HQ (Brussels) narrative was consistent ¹³	No	No	No	No	No
OC 13	NATO TCNs narratives consistent & aligned with NATO ¹⁴	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
CF 4	NATO TCNs actions were consistent with their words	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Yes	Yes
CF 5	Overarching NATO HQ themes/messages integrated in comms ¹⁵ SHAPE StratCom Frameworks regularly used in comms ¹⁶	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
OC 14	Execution of the Communications Campaign	Mixed	No	Yes	Mixed	Mixed
CF 6	StratCom as mindset informed the work of the ISAF command ¹⁷	Mixed	Mixed	Yes	Mixed	Mixed
CF 7	Effective coordination of communication-related capabilities: ¹⁸ From NATO HQ political-military & SHAPE, down to ISAF Within theatre: From ISAF HQ to Regional Command HQs	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
OC 15	J2 Intelligence actively supported the communication effort ¹⁹	No	No	No	No	No
CF 8	In-theatre imagery collection & distribution was sufficient ²⁰	No	No	No	Mixed	No
CF 9	National hometown outreach programs ²¹	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CF 10	NATO Communication and Information-Related Capabilities	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
CF 11	Comms doctrine and policy was seamless + 'fit for purpose' ²²	No	No	No	No	No
CF 12	NATO TCNs had sufficient, trained info-related capabilities ²³	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
CF 13	Communication-related resources in theatre were sufficient Senior practitioners were trained and experienced in function	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
CF 14	CJPOTF-owned Media ²⁴	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
CF 15	Electronic (Radio, TV, SMS, Social Media) were effective	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
CF 16	Print (Newspaper, Magazines) were effective Billboard campaign was effective	No	No	No	No	No
CF 17	Traditional Communications activities were effective	No	No	No	No	No

OVERALL MISSION CONTEXT

CODE	FACTOR	OUTCOME						Mission Overall Aug 2003 - Dec 2014
		NATO leads ISAF - Expansion thru AFG Aug 2003 - Oct 2006	Riga Summit - McChrystal Report Nov 2006 - Aug 2009	McChrystal Command - AFG Has Security Lead Sep 2009 - Jun 2013	NATO Draws Down - ISAF Mission End Jul 2013 - Dec 2014			
AB 5	Communication in AFG							
AB 6	Afghan government could easily communicate with population	No	No	Mixed	Yes	Mixed	Mixed	
OC 16	Afghan government was effective at taking comms lead ²⁵	No	No	Mixed	Yes	No	No	
	ISAF major factor enhancing AFG government comms ability ²⁶	No	No	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Mixed	
CF 18	NATO HQ-level communication activities and Outreach	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	
CF 19	SEFCGEN + key NATO officials outreach efforts were effective ²⁷	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	
CF 20	PDD comms output and products had impact & effect ²⁸	Mixed	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mixed	
CF 21	NATO HQ comms effort well connected to national efforts ²⁹	No	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Mixed	Yes	
CF 22	Good Rol: stakeholder visits from nations to AFG ³⁰	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	
CF 23	Good Rol: stakeholder visits from AFG to NATO ³¹	Mixed	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	
CF 24	Comms lessons learned were captured/integrated/shared ³²	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	
	Imagery realizing strategic objectives packaged & distributed ³³	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	
PI 12	Effects (in NATO nations)							
PI 13	Public opinion was supportive of the ISAF mission	Yes	Mixed	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	
PI 14	Public opinion was supportive of the nations' armed forces	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
	Overt public protest/political recriminations were minimal ³⁴	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
	Effects (in Afghanistan)							
AB 8	Induce desired behaviours							
AB 9	Reintegration of insurgents was successful ³⁵	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	No	
AB 10	Ability of insurgents to influence population was diminished	No	No	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	No	
AB 11	Ability to influence legitimate governance was neutralized	No	No	No	No	No	No	
AB 12	Morale and cohesion of insurgents was undermined	No	No	No	No	No	No	
AB 13	Cross-border infiltration & insurgent support was minimized	No	No	No	No	Mixed	No	
	Counter-narcotics program was supported by population	No	No	No	No	No	No	
	Perception-related (based on polling data, including):							
	Support for national Government (% very or somewhat good) ³⁶		80, 67, 71 (2009)	73, 73, 75, 74 (2013)	75 (2014)			
	Support for Afghan National Army ³⁷		53, 50, 56 (2009)	56, 60, 57, 58 (2013)	60 (2014)			
	Support for Afghan National Police ³⁸		47, 40, 45 (2009)	41, 46, 43, 42 (2013)	47 (2014)			
	Country headed in right direction (% yes) ³⁹	44 (2006)	42, 38, 42 (2009)	47, 46, 52, 57 (2013)	55 (2014)			
	Fear for personal or family safety (%yes) ⁴⁰	40 (2006)	49, 48, 51 (2009)	54, 56, 48, 59 (2013)	65 (2014)			
	Fear of encountering international forces (% yes) ⁴¹			78, 77 (2013)	76 (2014)			
	Afghan confidence in media, % (paper, radio, TV) ⁴²	77 (2006)	62, 63, 62 (2009)	57, 69, 71, 67 (2013)	73 (2014)			

Assessment Outcomes : YES (score 6.5-10) MIXED (score 4-6) NO (score 0-3.5)

Code: PI: Policy/Operational Success Indicator; **OC:** Operational Conduct of Mission; **AB:** Afghan government /Insurgent Behaviour; **CF:** Communications Function

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- 1 Key Alliance mission objectives are drawn from the overarching SACEUR Operational Plan for the ISAF in Afghanistan (OPLAN 10302), which were: Alliance Political End-State: “A self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government able to exercise its sovereign authority, independently, throughout Afghanistan.”
Alliance Political Centre of Gravity: “Maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance.”
NATO Alliance Military Strategic Centre of Gravity: “The political will and ability of contributing nations to sustain the ISAF mission, with balanced forces and resources.”
 - 2 U.N. Security Council Resolution 1868 (2009) details key areas of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, including:
 - promote more coherent support by the international community to the Afghan government
 - strengthen cooperation with ISAF
 - provide political outreach through a strengthened and expanded presence throughout the country
 - provide good offices in support of Afghan-led reconciliation programs
 - support efforts to improve governance and the rule of law and to combat corruption
 - play a central coordinating role to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid
 - monitor the human rights situation of civilians and coordinate human rights protection
 - support the electoral process through the Afghan Independent Electoral Commission
 - support regional cooperation in working for a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan
 - 3 TCN = Troop Contributing Nation. This factor is meant to express to what extent national governments were seized of the NATO ISAF mission, including force contributions but also through the active engagement of national leaders and Parliamentarians to explain the mission in its various guises and evolutions to media and the general public.
 - 4 The security sector reform activity “Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration” line of effort is not explicitly scored as a stand-alone activity. This is because the “disarmament” piece, focused on heavy weapons in and around the capital, did not last beyond the first time period being considered. The element “reintegration” is included as factor AB 8. “Demobilization” was deemed too difficult to assess given how interconnected it is to the evolution of the Afghan National Security Forces, and which constitutes two factors in any event (PI 4 and PI 5).
 - 5 Including Michelle Hughes, *The Afghan National Police in 2015 and Beyond*, United States Institute of Peace Annual Report, May 2014, and Anthony Cordesman, “*Afghanistan National Security Forces and Security Lead Transition: The Assessment Process, Metrics, and Efforts to Build Capacity*,” Center for Security and International Studies, July 24, 2012.
 - 6 The counter-terrorism mission Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) operated in Afghanistan through to the end of December 2014 as did ISAF. Of note, Afghan civilian casualties caused by forces from NATO countries, in Afghan eyes and in the West, could not be reasonably differentiated between NATO and OEF.
 - 7 NATO Joint Analysis Lessons Learned Centre, “*Protection of Civilians: How ISAF Reduced Civilian Casualties*,” June 2015.
 - 8 Various principles as identified in NATO and national doctrines inform the conduct of military operations, including for counter-insurgency. At times, doctrine and guidance can appear to be a shopping list of every prospective variable that could have an impact – for instance, COMISAF Gen Petraeus’ Counterinsurgency Guidance (27 July 2010) issued to the force lists 24 items to shape operational conduct. Still, there are broad similarities in core NATO doctrine and that of major troop contributing nations albeit with some minor variations, as to be expected. Three principles that are widely held in common as critical are drawn from the keystone manual AJP-01(D) *Allied Joint and Multinational Operations*, (Dec 2010):
“Definition of Objectives. Joint multinational operations must be focused towards clearly defined and commonly understood objectives that contribute to the achievement of the desired end-state.... Four key questions should be considered when defining the objectives and the end-state: (1) What is the mission purpose? (2) What criteria constitute mission accomplishment? (3) What are the exit criteria? (4) Who declares success or victory?
Unity of Purpose and Effort. Multinational operations depend on cooperation and coordination to realize maximum combined effect. Military forces achieve this principally through unity of command, which provides the necessary cohesion for planning and execution of operations. This can only be done by vesting the authority to direct and coordinate the action of all forces and military assets in a single commander. In a complex operational environment the commander must also strive for coordination with the other instruments of power. Unity of command is rarely possible when dealing with non-military agencies, so unity of purpose and effort is more appropriate... Unity of effort recognizes the need for a coherent approach to a common objective between NATO forces and other military forces present in the area with a different chain of command and between the military and civilian components of any operation.
Credibility. A NATO-led force must be credible. A force must respond with professional bearing and swift, effective reactions to incidents. Establishing credibility is essential for building confidence.”

9 So, “was it done?” in contrast to “was it effective?” (OC11). The most cogent explanation of why understanding motivations is key to realizing desired behaviours and the role, place, value and conduct of Target Audience Analysis is found in Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict*, (2011), and Steve Tatham, *Using Target Audience Analysis to Aid Strategic Level Decision making*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA. (August 2015).

10 Part of the challenge of assessing the degree to which the NATO narrative was consistent is that those who hear about the mission understandably do not distinguish between different NATO-related message sources. While the ‘average observer’ would regard all Afghanistan-related commentary by all nations as ‘NATO messaging’, differentiation amongst message sources helps establish if major organisational components are more or less aligned with overarching agreed themes and messages. The groupings and means to distinguish between them are:

- i. NATO military HQs – including SHAPE, Allied Command Transformation, Joint Forces Command Brunssum, ISAF HQ, ISAF Joint Command, Regional Commands, and other associated organisations like the NATO Training Mission - Afghanistan), but not Combined Forces Command - Afghanistan.
- ii. NATO HQ – including the Secretary General, Spokesperson/Press & Media, Senior Civilian Representative’s Office (Kabul) and senior officials. The Chairman of the NATO Military Committee and the International Military Staff are considered part of NATO HQ.
- iii. NATO nations – member and troop contributing partner nations, and their national delegations at NATO HQ.

The ‘NATO narrative’ is thus the aggregation of all messages, words, images, signalling and actions that are associated directly or indirectly with the Alliance in all the above forms. During the ISAF mission, the written expression of this would be found mainly but not exclusively in the Overall Mission Narrative (produced by NATO HQ), ISAF StratCom Frameworks (SHAPE), and the Master Message Document (Public Diplomacy/Media Operations Centre).

11 To what extent was the overarching public communications messaging of the various NATO military HQs consistent with each other, and in tune/aligned with that of NATO HQ? In this respect, there are many critics. Here, ‘consistent’ is not taken to mean one unchanging narrative from day one through to the end of the campaign some 11 years later. Rather, when a major shift of focus occurred, such as the 2009 mission reset, did media operations ensure that NATO HQ messaging was quickly adapted and distributed, and quickly integrated into all its messaging outlets (spokespersons, Web, speeches, etc.)

12 To what extent was public communication and messaging (spokespersonship and information release through news releases or the Web) impactful? For example, a transcript review of ISAF press briefings shows a wide range of ability amongst spokespersons to explain military actions: in short, some were considerably better at it than others. In certain cases, the obvious inexperience of a spokesperson and/or supporting staff was a significant barrier to communications success. A good spokesperson and good information products are adept at an explanation or turn of phrase that illuminates understanding and gets the “right message” to be picked up by media. In addition, some COMISAFs were uncomfortable doing interviews in English, which directly affected the command’s ability to communicate with major English media outlets including major news wire services. Along with media in other major troop contributing nations, the English-language media (and German, though to a lesser extent) tended to drive broader international coverage and supplied more of the “headlines” and column inches/broadcast time of regular interest in NATO HQ. And, some COMISAFs, Regional Commanders and very senior staff were simply ‘allergic’ to media, and took steps to limit the number of interventions with them to the minimum possible.

13 To what extent was the overarching public communications messaging from NATO HQ consistent and in tune/aligned with NATO HQ-agreed strategic-level messaging (that is, did public interlocutors follow guidance from the HQ)?

14 To what extent was the overarching public communication messaging coming from major troop contributing nations consistent and in tune/aligned with NATO HQ-agreed strategic-level messaging?

15 To what extent was NATO HQ/SHAPE messaging demonstrably used in ISAF HQs communication efforts?

16 To what extent was the messaging from the Strategic Communication Frameworks, issued annually by NATO HQ from 2009-2014, reflected in the public communication messaging from NATO HQ, NATO military HQs, and major troop contributing nations?

17 To what extent was the concept of StratCom a real part of the operating condition and mindset at the HQ (“the integration of military communication capabilities and functions with other military activities in order to understand and shape the information environment to inform, persuade, or influence audiences in support of NATO aims and objectives”)?

18 How effective were the structures, mechanisms and people at coordinating the information effort from the political-military HQs to ISAF; and, within and amongst the various ISAF HQs in theatre?

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- 19 To what extent did the Intelligence function support communication requirements to better understand the information environment, including data collection efforts regarding individual and community behavioural indicators, and the sharing of imagery including photo and video?
 - 20 The extent and ease by which visual imagery (photos, video) of broadcast quality could be sourced from NATO nations in theatre by ISAF, SHAPE or NATO HQ, processed and distributed in support of the strategic campaign objective?.
 - 21 This includes national media embedding programs.
 - 22 The extent to which the numerous NATO operational and communication and information-related capability functional doctrine and policies are aligned. This includes keystone Allied Joint Publications, Military Committee Policies, and SHAPE Directives on StratCom, Info Ops, Public Affairs, and PSYOPS. This is a measure of whether different interpretations of the various NATO and national policies and doctrine led to differences of opinion that materially affected the work at hand.
 - 23 The extent to which NATO nations were able to field trained and qualified communication practitioners in the functions of Public Affairs, PSYOPS, Info Ops and StratCom (acknowledging that the latter did not exist until the second half of the campaign).
 - 24 Weight of scoring by 7 PSYOPS practitioners and observers of PSYOPS who served over the course of 2006-2014.
 - 25 The extent to which Afghan Government Ministers and senior officials publicly led communications in response to an event, issue or crisis (as opposed to NATO, or even the UN).
 - 26 The extent to which ISAF enabled effective Host Nation capability in public communications including capacity building in provincial Government offices, at various national Ministries, with Afghan National Security Forces and through the provision of capabilities to disseminate government communication including through the Government Media Information Centre (GMIC) and the National Communications Coordination Centre (NCCC).
 - 27 Including media outreach, public diplomacy activities, engagements and conference appearances by the Secretary General, NATO Spokesperson's office and the Senior Civilian Representative's Office. Effective is used mainly in the sense of the effort and effect to realize the political Centre of Gravity and of the Alliance military strategic Centre of Gravity.
 - 28 PDD = Public Diplomacy Division. A general assessment of overall Afghanistan- and ISAF-related activities including engagements and outreach such as flagship events and briefings in NATO nations; content quality, quantity of material and breadth of product developed and promulgated by NATO HQ/Press & Media, the Media Operations Centre, NATO website, NATO TV, multimedia, publishing (including NATO Review), and for NATO Summits.
 - 29 How well the NATO HQ communication effort was organized and resourced to inform, shape and assist national communications effort, including for the smaller troop contributing nations. Connectivity existed in many forms and functions including the extensive preparations and discussions in advance of Ministerials and in particular for NATO Summits; in support of North Atlantic Council and Military Committee meetings; the Committee on Public Diplomacy; regular interactions with delegations at NATO HQ and SHAPE HQ and, most importantly from a day-to-day operational perspective, through the work of the Media Operations Centre.
 - 30 The number, quality and value of outcomes from Transatlantic Opinion Leaders, and Media Opinion Leaders visits to Afghanistan.
 - 31 The number, quality and value and outcomes from visits by Afghan officials to capitals.
 - 32 The extent to which communication lessons learned were captured and shared within NATO HQs and with NATO nations. This includes demonstrable changes to HQ structures, conferences, workshops and mechanisms to effectively allow communication and information-related NATO practitioners including Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, PSYOPS and Info Ops to come together on a daily or regular basis to manage and learn from the campaign.

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- 33 The ability of NATO HQ to source and share broadcast quality imagery with nations, on-line using the Web, and with global media.
- 34 To what extent did the Afghanistan campaign result in overt recriminations or protests over engagement in the mission, including election campaigns influenced by Afghanistan including the number of Governments that fell; Ministers/Secretaries of Defence, Foreign Affairs or Development that were fired; public protests and demonstrations; national inquiries or serious calls for them (in the vein of the much-delayed Chilcot inquiry in the UK over the British involvement in the Iraq War)? In terms of response by the public to the war, operation Iraqi Freedom offers a useful comparative model, where national leaders and senior officials in US and UK in particular were, and continue to be vilified for their role in prosecuting that campaign.
- 35 United Nations Development Program, *Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program: 2014 Annual Project Progress Report*; and Steven Zyck, *Afghanistan In Transition: Peace and Integration*, An Introduction, Civil-Military Fusion Centre, April 2012.
- 36 Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014, A Survey of the Afghan People*.
- 37 Average of two questions: “ANA is honest and fair with Afghan people” and “ANA helps improve security in AFG” (% who strongly agree), *Afghanistan in 2014, A Survey of the Afghan People*.
- 38 Average of two questions: “ANP is honest and fair with Afghan people” and “ANP helps improve security in AFG” (% who strongly agree), *Afghanistan in 2014, A Survey of the Afghan People*.
- 39 Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014, A Survey of the Afghan People*, The data on the chart is aligned and in order with the years in each particular time period assessed.
- 40 ‘Always + often + sometimes’, in Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014, A Survey of the Afghan People*.
- 41 ‘Some + a lot’, in Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014, A Survey of the Afghan People*.
- 42 Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014, A Survey of the Afghan People*. For 2013 and 2014, Afghans report having the most confidence in media amongst 11 groups of officials, institutions and organisations (in 2014, the last survey available, religious leaders are second and community shuras third).

CHAPTER 8: FIT FOR PURPOSE GOING FORWARD?



Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

“We can’t know with absolute certainty what the future of warfare will hold, but we do know it will be exceedingly complex, unpredictable, and – as they say in the staff colleges – “unstructured.” Just think about the range of security challenges we face right now beyond Iraq and Afghanistan: terrorism and terrorists in search of weapons of mass destruction, Iran, North Korea, military modernization programs in Russia and China, failed and failing states, revolution in the Middle East, cyber, piracy, proliferation, natural and man-made disasters, and more. And I must tell you, when it comes to predicting the nature and location of our next military engagements, since Vietnam, our record has been perfect. We have never once gotten it right, from the Mayaguez to Grenada, Panama, Somalia, the Balkans, Haiti, Kuwait, Iraq, and more – we had no idea a year before any of these missions that we would be so engaged. “

U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates¹

INTRODUCTION

The current unsettled security situation in Afghanistan notwithstanding, it is difficult to conceive of a set of circumstances that would in the near future call upon the Alliance to once again deploy more than 130,000 (90,000 of those being American) principally ground forces to a Central Asian or Middle Eastern country to fight against a determined counterinsurgency. NATO has also not demonstrated a lot of enthusiasm for counterterrorist operations, these generally having been left to coalitions of the willing. Nor does it seem likely that NATO will help invade countries or assist the overthrow of leaders (recalling Afghanistan 2001 and Iraq 2003), although the two major air operations in Kosovo 1999 and Libya 2011 had the undercurrent of regime change to them. As such, it does seem that ISAF was a unique mission. That being the case, is *that* campaign with its elements variously of peace-support, reconstruction and development then counterinsurgency, a good model on which to propose recommendations for policy, process and structural change to NATO’s communications and information-related disciplines?

The intent of this chapter is to briefly outline key characteristics of the future security environment, to confirm if the recommendations proposed in this report are pertinent to contemporary and future conflict, and not so specific to counterinsurgency as to render them void because “that could apply to ISAF but not for everything else NATO will do.” It is not the intent to assess the NATO Command and Force Structure’s current StratCom capability, or how well placed it may be for the variety of prospective campaigns NATO will surely be called to wage. It may be surmised though that many of the challenges in evidence throughout the ISAF campaign turn up in 2016 and beyond.

Arguably, those challenges are amplified during occasions of hybrid warfare and in the absence of an operational order, thereby not having recourse to the resources of the Crisis Establishment and putting considerably more pressure on the Peacetime Establishment of the strategic-level HQs. On balance, where things stand for NATO StratCom at the end of December 2015 and whether that is cause for optimism or pessimism depends on whether one is predisposed to a “glass half-full or glass or half-empty” perspective. For those who prefer a view that the glass is half-full:

- many nations have operational experience with StratCom as an organising model at NATO military HQs.
- there is a strong cadre of experienced civilian practitioners at NATO strategic-level HQs.
- there is a new-found energy and readiness regarding reform, per the Readiness Action Plan.
- a Bi-Strategic Command - agreed Military Committee StratCom policy is under consideration with expectations that a new policy of some description will be approved and implemented in 2016.
- SHAPE StratCom and Allied Command Transformation continue to produce guidelines such as the StratCom Handbook, products such as the Narrative Development Tool, and to conduct quality conferences and training.
- strategic-level assets like NATO TV and the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence are in place.
- most of the NATO Corps HQs are migrating to models that incorporate a StratCom structure.

For those who consider the glass is half-empty:

- the information environment and the impact of the paradigm shift in communications does not merit a mention in the NATO Strategic Concept (*Active Engagement, Modern Defence*) which is meant to “guide the next phase in NATO’s evolution so it continues to be effective in a changing world, against new threats, with new capabilities and new partners.”
- StratCom is not a focus or worth mention in the Secretary General’s Annual Reports to date.
- there are 36 Smart Defence activities but none related to communication functions.
- the 2009 NATO StratCom policy is due for a major refresh but there seems little appetite to do so.

- there is no NATO military StratCom policy.
- there is no NATO StratCom military (stand-alone) doctrine.
- existing operational, communication and information-related policy and doctrine is not overtly helpful (for instance, communications does not feature in the 10 principles, called attributes, of NATO Counterinsurgency)²
- professional military capability in the communication and information-related functions can only really be said to be resident in at best a half dozen members, about the same number as 10 years ago.
- it took until September 2014 for a Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence to be established and accredited (the *21st* COE).

BLUF (BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT)

- the future security environment will continue to be dangerous, unstable, and uncertain.
- NATO nations should not expect long lead times to build and deploy forces. Speed of engagement and structured partnerships are the future.
- adversaries are already operating in and influencing the information environment before forces are deployed, meaning communication disciplines need to be fully operational before arriving.
- this report's recommendations are not ISAF-specific and do pertain to the urgent communications and information-related capability needs of current and future conflict.

DISCUSSION

The inherent value of high-readiness standing forces continues to be demonstrated time and again, most recently during the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector campaign over Libya, the deployment of troops by some Western nations to fight Ebola in Sierra Leone, and the coalition operations against Daesh/ISIL, all of which necessitated a response to events that unfolded very quickly. Quick reaction forces have been a particular focus of NATO reform since the launch of the NATO Response Force (NRF) in 2002, and its Full Operational Capability (FOC) status in November 2006. The NATO Force Structure also counts rapid deployable HQs in the land, maritime and air environments.³

2 NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Counterinsurgency (COIN)* AJP-3.4.4, February 2011, p. 3-20.

3 <http://www.aco.nato.int/page134134653.aspx>

At the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO Allies agreed to enhance the capabilities of the NRF “in order to respond to emerging security challenges posed by Russia as well as the risks emanating from the Middle East and North Africa.”⁴ The Readiness Action Plan also signalled the intent to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), this being a “Spearhead Force” of around 5,000 ground troops supported by air, maritime and special forces, with lead

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In today’s information environment, inform, influence and persuade functions should be as instrumental to the force package as deploy, fight, and sustain elements.

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elements able to start deploying in 48 hours. These “will be based in their home countries, but be able to deploy from there to wherever they are needed for exercises or crisis response.”⁵ And, NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) will be created in six of the newer NATO nations,”...to ensure NATO high-readiness forces can deploy into an assigned region as quickly as possible. With the help of NFIUs, some units of the VJTF will be capable of moving in just two days, with most ready to move in less than seven days.”⁶

So, rapidity of deployment and employment seem to be powerful characteristics of future forces implying a host of embedded, integrated capabilities to be successful. It is a certainty that if a situation compels these assets to be put on notice to move or to actually deploy there will be massive media attention, including international interest. Credibility will be key and this will be won or lost early on. It should not be assumed there will be time to build capability over several years as was the case for ISAF. In today’s information environment, inform, influence and persuade functions should be as instrumental to the force package as deploy, fight, and sustain elements.

4 <http://www.aco.nato.int/nato-response-force--very-high-readiness-joint-task-force.aspx>

5 <http://www.aco.nato.int/nato-response-force--very-high-readiness-joint-task-force.aspx>

6 http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_05/20150508_1505-Factsheet-RAP-en.pdf

The Future Security Environment

The future security environment will bring further incredible advancements in technologies that make capital assets more lethal at lower cost, or even smaller and less visible to the naked eye or to detection by other means.

Adversaries can be expected to choose to fight using ways and means that avoid the West's comparative advantage in weapons and technology, resorting to asymmetric means including the exploitation of increasingly interconnected systems and networks. Already the most cost-effective and largest return on investment for the insurgent or malign actor's dollar is the ability to operate effectively in, manipulate and shape the information environment. The low cost of computing power and the ease of creating compelling print and visual content, combined with the global reach of the Internet and the ubiquity of cellular technology, means the cost to make and distribute product including video is a pittance. The collection, editing and means of disseminating powerful imagery, fabrications or rumour, or to connect widely dispersed like-minded parties and communities to incite, is now available to literally anyone in the world with access to a phone or computer.

The ISAF mission showed how a determined enemy with an intimate knowledge of local conditions can execute a successful influence campaign based on matching words with actions including through deliberate intimidation and violent acts. The campaign was rudimentary but focused, disciplined and ultimately effective. It was instrumental at impeding reconstruction and development, delaying institutional reforms, slowing the growth of licit business activities, hampering government capacity building efforts, and swaying NATO troop contributing national audiences.

Recent events have also demonstrated what effects can be obtained by a country with a determined leader that controls many of the media, communications, and information means of production and is armed with the will to marshal those assets. Russia's unscrupulous but coordinated campaign has galvanised a national population and also served to sow confusion and doubt elsewhere making it more of a challenge to fashion a cohesive joined-up international strategy. And, the West has dramatically witnessed how an ideologically driven movement like Daesh/ISIL can creatively employ all channels of communication including print, electronic, social media and video to produce material of exceptional quality, to chilling effect.⁷

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At the very least, to entice what appears to be a significant number of recruits to their ranks.

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Crises have the nasty habit of happening when they are least expected. When national forces under NATO command deploy, communication and information-related capabilities are drawn from nations with limited national resources in those functional areas.

Usually there is some capacity amongst the same “reliable few” nations to deploy a few assets in direct support of NATO, but much less so in direct support to other

activities or friendly force actors in the operational space, including capacity building of indigenous governments or their security forces. And very often, events do not transpire to the threshold of NATO issuing an operational order and activating forces at all. In those circumstances, NATO is left with little more than traditional public diplomacy and public affairs activities from static HQs, using the Peacetime Establishment force, facing the considerable challenge of navigating around competing political agendas even within the Alliance, or relying on the largesse of individual nations to seed-fund one-off initiatives.

There are several well-considered reports about defence and security trends of the future,⁸ and defence and security-related events of 2014 and 2015 would suggest that from a communication and information perspective, ‘the future is now’. Predictions about trends and developments abound, and even the ‘known knowns’ are enough to keep political leaders and military planners awake at night. These include impacts as a result of demographic changes particularly in the Middle East, Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; climate change, technology proliferation; pressure on resources including food, water and energy; extreme weather events; cities and urban areas more frequently

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8 The following are of particular note:

National Intelligence Council's Global Trends 2030: Alternative Futures;
UK Ministry of Defence, Global Strategic Trends - Out to 2045, 5th Edition, 2014; and,
Council on Foreign Relations National Intelligence Estimate(s).
Conference of Defence Associations Institute, the *Strategic Outlook* series.

used as places of conflict; adversaries increasingly being non-state actors or proxies for malign governments; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; failed and failing states; and extremist ideologies including violent jihadism.

Amongst the considerable array of future security environment prognosticators, none are suggesting that operations are going to get *less* complicated than they are now.⁹

Recent experience and future security environment research suggests that:

- if not more dangerous and unstable, then the future is expected to be less certain and predictable.
- defence- and security-related issues and operations are all more complex.
- there are more actors involved.
- often, the necessary responses to events includes defence but that mitigation or resolution puts considerably more emphasis on security components.
- issues emerge and erupt with alarming rapidity.
- there are more people watching, prospectively commenting and getting directly involved in events.

Two contemporary situations serve to test these ‘future security environment’ characteristics against today’s reality, and hold clues about how diplomatic assets and military forces may be used, and in particular what this means for communications.

It’s Complicated: Russia/Ukraine

A succinct expression of national strategic intent comes from former U.S. President Ronald Reagan who said, “Here’s my strategy on the Cold War: We win, they lose.” Narrative construction is not quite so simple as that these days, and it is certainly more complicated and nuanced than the binary “you are either with us, or you are with the terrorists” formulation that U.S. President Bush used in his speech to Congress following the 9-11 attacks.

9 Though, there are a number of social scientists who hold the view that over the course of human history, the world has become less violent (most notably Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (2011), and Joshua Goldstein’s *Winning the War on War: the Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (2011). There may well be fewer occurrences of major state-on-state war in our time, but these studies will come as cold comfort to the many victims of contemporary conflict and violence. An Australian think-tank calculates that while the long-term trend in peacefulness and levels of violence including inter-state conflict is positive, in the last eight years the world has grown less peaceful, “the level of terrorism has grown steadily in the last decade and shows no signs of abating,” and that the number of protracted and intense conflicts has increased. Institute for Economics and Peace, *The Global Peace Index 2015*, p. 45]

Russia's bold use of information as a major national instrument of power to facilitate its annexation of Crimea has been well reported and its various elements dissected.¹⁰

“What Russia has been able to do through the Gerasimov doctrine is to properly articulate and resource the place of influence in an operational design,” says retired UK Commander Dr. Steve Tatham. “If we look at the presence of the little green men in Crimea – *that* was the epitome of *Maskirovka* and Reflexive Control. Everyone knew that they were Russians and yet NATO decision-making went into paralysis. It was a masterpiece, a master-class in directed, controlled, planned information operations.”¹¹

No amount of strongly worded statements or breadth of social media campaign seems likely to change the situation on the ground; rather, any positive change would be achieved through a combination of diplomatic and economic actions, backed by meaningful military assurance measures, all being robustly communicated. If that did not noticeably change the situation, then at the very least it would serve to deter Russia from further untoward activities particularly against NATO member states.

The impressive outputs of organisations such as the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre and stopfake.org have proven to be important efforts to the significantly resourced effort by Russia. Those efforts, combined with a strong StratCom campaign by NATO fronted by the Secretary General and backed by demonstrative assurance measures such as multiple exercises and the deployment of air-policing patrols, plus adaptation measures including enhancements to high readiness forces, appear to be having some impact. According to the Pew Research Centre, favourable opinion of Russia now “trails that of the U.S. by a significant margin in most regions of the world,” and has declined significantly in countries like Germany where half those polled in 2010 had a positive view of Russia, but by 2015 only 27% did. It appears the feeling in Russia towards the West is mutual.¹²

Still, the perception amongst many is that the West is losing the communications effort. The sheer volume, breath and audacity of Russia's effort including the consolidation of major media holdings into a massively funded state-

10 Including Maria Snegovaya, "Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare", Russia Report 1, Institute for the Study of War, September 2015; and NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Internet Trolling as a Hybrid Warfare Tool: The Case of Latvia, and The Manipulative Techniques of Russia's Information Campaign: Euro-Atlantic Values and Russia's Strategic Communication in the Euro-Atlantic Space.

11 Octavian Manea, "To Respond to ISIS and Hybrid Warfare We Need to Invest in POPINT [Population Intelligence], *Small Wars Journal*, Aug. 26, 2015.

12 "Russia, Putin Held in Low Regard around the World," Pew Research Centre, August 5, 2015.

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“If we look at the presence of the little green men in Crimea – that was the epitome of *Maskirovka* and Reflexive Control. Everyone knew that they were Russians and yet NATO decision-making went into paralysis. It was a masterpiece, a master-class in directed, controlled, planned information operations.”

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controlled content producer; the tremendous expansion of its news distribution network; deliberate falsification; and using deception as a tactic to delay and distract is less about building public support outside Russia for its actions than it is to create doubt and sow confusion about what is the truth. In turn, this is expected to bring public pressure to bear to soften repercussions in return. The competitive advantage of the West, and of NATO, is that its strength and resilience lies

in the element of trust in national populations to be able to make informed decisions based on an objective presentation of facts, views and opinions, its people given opportunity to confirm, check or add to the public debate.

These campaigns, however, are not usually short-term efforts, as the Cold War attests. Credibility is key. And, when policy choices are not credible, the general mistrust in government occasioned by recent experience makes it more difficult to fashion a case to mobilise public opinion behind decisive action, be it diplomatic, economic and/or military in nature.

It's Complicated: Daesh/ISIL

The U.S.-led coalition's 2003 invasion of Iraq to rid the country of the troublesome and despotic ruler Saddam Hussein was the catalyst for a series of interconnected developments with major global security-related repercussions still being felt today.

Long-standing sectarian divisions in Iraq and Syria, two countries that border each other, had been kept at bay for decades by strongmen reliant on their ubiquitous state security apparatus' repressive and violent means to eliminate or control opposition. The general lawlessness that prevailed after Hussein was removed from power in Iraq, and the Coalition Provisional Authority's 'de-Ba'athification' laws and disbandment of the security services were catalysts for a Sunni insurgency that quickly turned vicious, fuelled by a resurgent Al-Qaeda.

The Anbar Awakening and the Sunni Awakening from around September 2006 was a reaction mainly to the realisation that Al-Qaeda was waging a “sectarian war” through a campaign of murder and intimidation of Iraqis, not just coalition forces.

This massive shift of allegiances on the battlefield roughly coincided with the troop ‘surge’ under General David Petraeus’ command, degrading the insurgency sufficiently over time to allow the UK and later the U.S. to withdraw its combat forces. Elements of what remained of Al-Qaeda in Iraq migrated mainly to eastern Syria, establishing themselves alongside displaced Sunnis, adding further confusion to the disparate array of forces allied against and in favour of Syria’s Bashar Hafez Al Assad in that country’s civil war.

These former Al-Qaeda elements morphed and merged with other like-minded groups into the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, the term favoured by the coalition against it, and by NATO) – or ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a term favoured by a majority of Western media. In June 2014 the group proclaimed a worldwide caliphate claiming authority over Muslims worldwide. As of December 2015, Daesh/ISIL controls significant territory in northern Iraq and western Syria, and counts affiliations with several other like-minded groups in the Middle East, Africa (including Boko Haram) and parts of Asia. Internal power struggles suggest that Al-Qaeda has since disassociated itself from Daesh/ISIL, and are now also fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The barbarities of Daesh/ISIL have received generous coverage worldwide on the Internet and on newscasts as a result of a well-funded and sophisticated communication campaign including high-quality video productions of various forms of executions, amputations, the destruction of major cultural sites and oddly enough, scenes of daily life in areas under their control. An extensive social media campaign has been effective at drawing new recruits to their cause. FBI Director James Comey observed in December 2014 that ISIL’s “propaganda is unusually slick. They are broadcasting their poison ... in something like 23 languages.”¹³ Daesh/ISIL has succeeded in drawing an unmatched level of international condemnation and uniting an unlikely conglomeration of nations and groups against them. This includes Iranians, Hezbollah, the Kurdish Peshmurga, and since September 2014, a U.S.-led air coalition “to eliminate the terrorist group ISIL and the threat they pose to Iraq, the region and the wider international community. It also symbolises the willingness and dedication of coalition members to work closely with our

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 13 [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/three-american-teens-recruited-online-are-caught-trying-to-join-the-islamic-state/2014/12/08/8022e6c4-7afb-11e4-84d4-7c896b90abdc_story.html?tid=hybrid_1.1_strip_1].

friends in the region and apply all available dimensions of national power necessary – diplomatic, informational, military, and economic – to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.”¹⁴

Thus, the counter-Daesh/ISIL effort binds the U.S. and several dozen allies around the world alongside Iran and Hezbollah to take the fight inside Syria, in effect assisting and bolstering the Assad regime – a combination of circumstances that have transpired in less than a year.¹⁵

The situation has led to the displacement of millions of Syrian refugees with real and direct consequences for many NATO members but particularly Turkey, which borders the region. There are now at least four distinct military campaigns taking place in Syria: Assad’s forces against the mainly Sunni Arab rebellion, between Assad and Daesh/ISIL, between Daesh/ISIL and the Kurdish People’s Protection Units; and between Turkey and the Kurds. The introduction of Russian military forces in October 2015 has, remarkably, complicated the situation.

Though NATO may not be directly implicated there are real implications for it. Structured partnerships are a key element of its work: ‘cooperative security’ is one of NATO’s three essential core tasks, the Strategic Concept stating that, “the promotion of Euro-Atlantic security is best assured through a wide network of partner relationships with countries and organisations around the globe.”¹⁶ Notably, the Arab League includes six of the seven countries of NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue (Israel being the exception). NATO’s Istanbul Cooperation Initiative includes four countries from the Gulf region, all of whom belong to the Arab League. A new ‘partners around the globe’ initiative includes Iraq. And at the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO announced an effort through the Partnership Interoperability Initiative to enhance operations with 24 partners, a diverse group ranging from Mongolia to the Republic of Korea, and four Arab League members.¹⁷

14 Release #20141018. U.S. Central Command. October 15, 2014.

15 Those developments followed air strikes by Egypt on Libya after the beheading of 21 Egyptian Christians in February 2015. Weeks later, a 10-nation coalition led by Saudi Arabia launched significant air strikes against weapons caches and military depots on rebel forces in Yemen that succeeded in toppling the government there. Soon after, Egyptian President Sisi, speaking on behalf of the 22-member Arab League, announced they "have decided to agree to the principle of a joint Arab military force," and that a "high level team" would be created to examine the force structure, apparently to number about 40,000 and include land, air and naval elements. The prospects of The Arab League constituting and employing such a force seems quite some time away yet. Even so, it is a remarkable expression of will, though it unlikely all members would contribute given that the organisation counts Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia as members.

16 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_84336.htm?

17 Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Georgia, Ireland, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, New Zealand, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine, and the United Arab Emirates.



Spanish and U.S. soldiers prepare for a flight in a Spanish CH-47 Chinook helicopter, 2008.

Photo: U.S. Department of Defense

A number of conclusions can be drawn from these developments that directly relate to NATO:

- political-military partnerships outside traditional groups of like-minded nations are the new norm.
- operations can take place in regions where NATO forces do not have a lot of recent experience, and alongside partners who are unfamiliar to them.
- NATO nations will be directly and indirectly engaged in increasingly interconnected and multi-faceted coalition operations. As always, effort and capabilities will vary significantly – and some may not wish to be publicly identified with the effort.
- the information environment is being shaped long before forces are deployed.
- there is a premium on Public Diplomacy activities.
- connections and networks lead to greater understanding. These relationships need to be well established with media, think-tanks and civil society *before* conflicts erupt.
- adversaries will be very skilled using modern media (made considerably easier when truth is not a factor and visual impact is), will own the means of production, and will put communication and information effect at the heart of their campaign.

- diaspora populations are more easily and quickly connected through technology.
- audiences are global and incredibly diverse – and may well have recently been ‘against us’.
- coalition members operate with different rule-sets governing communication: ‘openness and transparency’ is not necessarily a watchword or operational philosophy.
- the communications effort to detect, counter, develop, and disseminate coalition or NATO information – and to counter opponent communication activities or deny them access – is a major multi-disciplinary StratCom effort.
- this work demands professional operational communicators.

GOING FORWARD

As it turns out, the ISAF experience and lessons are pertinent and relevant to the conduct of communication for operations other than counterinsurgency, though there are at least three critical differences:

- NATO nations should not count on long lead times to build, train and deploy communications assets;
- the information environment is being shaped by adversaries before forces deploy or forces engage;¹⁸
- a single, overarching joined-up narrative may be problematic to achieve. Coordination and de-confliction of the various communication efforts then becomes a particular concern which can be managed in part by robust communication capabilities.

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 18 Citing what he described as the “extensive propaganda efforts employed by both ISIL and Russia,” U.S. Army Major-General Christopher Haas, director of the force management and development directorate for U.S. Special Operations Command, said its role in manning, training and equipping Military Information Support Operations (MISO, or PSYOPS in NATO parlance) is especially critical. U.S. Special Operations Command, already deployed at 21 U.S. embassies, is “working with country teams and interagency partners to challenge adversary information” and to close capability gaps by expanding MISO training into social media use, online advertising, web design and other areas.” “The military information forces use existing web and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to support military objectives by shaping perceptions while highlighting ISIL atrocities, coalition responses to ISIL activities, and coalition successes,” Brigadier-General Charles Moore, deputy director for global operations on the Joint Staff said. In Central Command’s area of responsibility, MISO’s efforts are focused on challenging violent extremists, and in European Command it is about “exposing Russian mistruths and their concerted efforts to mislead European audiences as to their true intentions.” See <http://www.stopfake.org/en/unprecedented-challenge-in-counterering-adversarial-propaganda-official-says/>



*German troops assist the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Mazar-e Sberif.
Photo: U.S. Department of Defense*

The recommendations identified in Chapter 2 therefore, all serve as forward- not backward-looking observations, as can be seen from the top three, here edited for length:

R1. Include expeditionary national military capability in all disciplines of StratCom as a requirement in the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). Nations, in turn should take steps to professionalise communication-related capabilities in their military forces.

R2. All military communication and information-related doctrine and policy, guided by the overarching NATO StratCom Policy, must be revised at the same time to obtain a unified baseline that can stand for several years. This includes Allied Joint Publications, Military Committee Policies, Allied Command Operations Directives, and the Bi-SC StratCom Handbook.

R3. NATO should invest to reinforce those areas of communication that were successful in ISAF. The requirement for these capabilities at NATO strategic HQs has not diminished as a result of the drawdown of forces in Afghanistan – in the current operating and information environments they have increased.

With these new challenges in mind, is NATO ready – doctrine in place, basing HQs, rapid response units – to conduct effective communications operations and ramp up capability quickly across the spectrum of StratCom disciplines? If not, NATO should not be surprised to “lose” the communication effort, if not more.

Given three indubitable truths – that the information environment has transformed, the operational environment has been fundamentally altered, and the future security environment will continue to be more chaotic and confused – the following 10 questions are relevant to our examination:

- do national and NATO communication and information efforts have an important place in waging modern conflict, and possibly helping to prevent it?
- are malign actors able to exploit the information environment to their advantage?
- should nations put faith and trust that malign actors will do worse than NATO in their communications campaigns?
- are nations satisfied with the national and NATO communication and information effort and effect?
- is doing better simply a function of ‘more coordination’ or ‘better use of existing assets’?
- is there a significant return on investment to do better?
- is communication effect an important factor to inform policy making and actions?
- is StratCom a key element of that process or is it simply a means to communicate decisions?
- is it important enough to professionalise the disciplines and assign the best generals and officials to lead the functions, or to leave it to chance within each of the constituent communities?
- how much is it worth to do better?

The next chapter explores one idea for consideration to realise better outcomes going forward.

CHAPTER 8.1

APPLYING 'SMART DEFENCE' PRINCIPLES TO COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION-RELATED CAPABILITY REQUIREMENTS - THE NATO JOINT COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVATION TEAM (JCAT)

The impact and effect of ISAF communications was constrained by a variety of factors including the international community's policy dysfunction and the overall disconnectedness of effort. Still, the situation was exacerbated by a remarkable paucity of deployable communications-related capability in Alliance members (the U.S. and Germany being notable exceptions) and partner nations from which forces under NATO command are drawn. From the NATO-led ISAF mission start in August 2003 to the last phase 11 years later when Afghan forces assumed security responsibility for the country, the campaign lacked depth in experienced, deployable personnel trained in StratCom-related disciplines.

The NATO Peacetime (PE) and Crisis Establishment (CE) have not kept pace with developments in the contemporary information environment, and bear little resemblance to the real need and actual practice including at NATO strategic HQs, ISAF, ISAF Joint Command, and particularly at Regional Commands. NATO HQ and Allied Command Operations HQ had only a very modest capability to augment the in-theatre communications effort during times of particularly high operational tempo, this being limited to *in extremis* deployments of a small number of individuals dispatched one at a time. When they deployed though, it was often for several weeks and theirs was real value-added effort. In short, there was no communications "strategic reserve" from which to draw to add vigour or impetus to any major communication-related line of effort or initiative, nor any reliable mechanism to establish and activate such forces even in situations of considerable urgency. The communication campaign, with no back-up at hand, lacked a reliable 'surge' capability to deploy and assist during times of need such as Command transitions in theatre and major milestones including a Loya Jirga, national elections or the NATO response to the Pakistan earthquake, let alone to offer a sustained communications-related capacity-building effort for Afghan institutions. This changed substantively only in 2013/14 when Afghan forces took the lead for security across the country, freeing up NATO assets who then re-doubled their efforts to assist during the transition year.

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For the first half of the campaign NATO had little more than a rudimentary ability in ‘modern’ communications including remarkably, an almost total inability to gather desired imagery or video from across the mission and distribute it to media agencies inside and outside of Afghanistan for strategic effect.

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For the first half of the campaign NATO had little more than a rudimentary ability in ‘modern’ communications including remarkably, an almost total inability to gather desired imagery or video from across the mission and distribute it to media agencies inside and outside of Afghanistan for strategic effect. Nations were able to do this with considerable impact for their national audiences, but there was little ability for the Alliance to leverage that any further.

By late 2009, six years in, considerable additional resources were starting to be made available in theatre that was to close much of that gap, though by virtue of where those resources came from the effort was increasingly weighted towards American audience interests and requirements. The lack of redundancy in the related disciplines widely acknowledged by leading operational practitioners to be critical in a counterinsurgency campaign may be surprising but is a fact. And any slack capacity that did exist anywhere in the NATO system could be and was regularly drawn away to support other even more pressing demands such as the Unified Protector operation. In short, the Alliance needed but lacked a NATO Response Force-like, standing strategic reserve of communication and information-related capabilities: a one-stop communications shop that was modular, scalable and could rapidly deploy anywhere, with a containerised suite of equipment that could be shipped by air, land or sea.

‘Smart defence’, introduced at the 2011 Munich Security Conference by NATO Secretary General Rasmussen, was a re-branding of an old concept – an initiative to set spending priorities and more effectively coordinate procurement, training, maintenance and support efforts, thereby taking greater advantage of opportunities to pool and share capabilities. This is a model best applied to obtain assets that all nations require but that few can afford on their own, or where it makes no sense to reproduce a specific capability throughout many members of the Alliance – for instance, 28 nations do not all need their own AWACS, missile defence systems and strategic airlift.

The benefits of capability sharing explains in part the interest and explosive growth in the NATO Centre of Excellence model.

Barring a series of catastrophic incidents such as major attacks on home soil, it does not seem likely that European defence spending will trend up in the near future. In Canada, defence spending is down to 1% of Gross Domestic Product and the overall figure of spending in the U.S. has declined though it still accounts for almost three-quarters of the NATO total, a proportion that is increasing over time.¹⁹ When times were 'good' few nations invested in creating communication-related capability branches and functions so it is unlikely to expect they might do so in times of fiscal austerity. Militaries are predisposed to invest in capital assets and in equipment that delivers kinetic effect, and there are now many competing demands for new, expensive requirements in cyber and space, a trade-off likely to the detriment of 'soft power' capabilities. Major campaigns in Iraq, more than a decade in Afghanistan, and the particular challenges posed by actors such as Russia and Daesh/ISIL have not fundamentally changed national defence planning in this regard. So if it has not happened after ISAF and the demonstrated effects of communications by Russia and Daesh, it is unlikely the almost two dozen NATO nations will create professional branches in the full suite of capabilities including Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Info Ops, PSYOPS and StratCom.

However, could the concept of smart defence apply to the development of a greater expeditionary and rapid response communications capability for NATO? Interestingly, an effective working model already exists.

The Joint Public Affairs Support Element (JPASE), based in Norfolk, Virginia, is one of three joint enabling capability units available to the nine Combatant Commands,²⁰ other U.S. agencies and institutions, and also to nations as part of a humanitarian response involving American military assets. This 'communications response force', a mix of full-time, part-time (Reserve) and civilian personnel is joint (drawing its members from multiple armed services), globally deployable, and can be mobile and in theatre within days following a deployment order. As an expeditionary force it is constructed in team modules similar to Special Forces units in order to arrive quickly and establish the basic infrastructure required for connectivity to start communications activity.

19 NATO, 2015 *Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence*, 22 June 2015.

20 In the U.S., there are six geography-based Combatant Command (Africa, Europe, Pacific, Central, Northern, Southern) and three Commands grouped around functions (Special Forces, Strategic and Transportation).

This allows the lead elements of a newly deploying force to immediately engage in the information environment and to help set the conditions for success pending the arrival of sustainment forces. Its work depends on ready-made processes, procedures and products to quickly be in business in a particular, localised information environment. The unit's configuration means it can provide a limited-time surge capability to commanders across the full continuum of prospective communications missions including humanitarian relief, peacetime catastrophe, crisis response and combat, symmetrical or otherwise.

“We are communication first responders to a crisis, incident or operation and with a short mission time on location,” said Capt(N) David Waterman, the unit's commanding officer. “We get in fast, triage the requirements, and can immediately provide a range of capabilities and products to the joint force commander – this could be designing the communication strategy, coordinating the process of strategic communication, providing crisis communication support including initial media liaison and analysis, social media expertise, or a live high-definition video feed to any media agency or distribution hub at the other end of the satellite link. And, we can usually do that in most situations or weather conditions from anywhere in the world. Essentially, it's whatever communications support the situation calls for and that the force commander needs.”

Given the mandate to provide a suite of services to all the Combatant Commands, JPASE is ‘common funded’ – paid for from a central account to its parent command. Depending on the mission some services are reimbursed by the requesting Combatant Command. These processes, authorities and funding mechanisms are all similar to NATO's common-funded assets. All unit members receive ongoing professional development to remain current in their trades. They maintain weapons skills, are qualified in urban combat tactics like tactical driving, and are equipped with personal protection including armour and chemical-biological-radiological gear. When not deployed, the JPASE provides Combatant Commands with expertise to assist with operational plan design and to assist at national-level exercises.

“The unit has participated in more than 400 events over the past 10 years of our existence,” said Waterman, “ranging from support to victims of national disasters in the United States, to helping USAID in Liberia to combat Ebola, emergency relief in the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan, and many deployments forward, including support to on-going coalition operations.”

Building deployable communication and information-related capabilities into the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is a necessary initiative and one that would take many years to realise.

In the interim, recent NATO experience including but not limited to ISAF suggests that there would be very considerable value and benefit to having a small standing force to directly support operations and accelerate the development of national capability. A European-based unit such as a Joint Communications Activation Team (JCAT) within the NATO Force Structure and modelled on a 'smart defence' construct would be a strategic asset serving as the means to provide a full range of high-value support in tasks like:

- enhancing the NATO Media Operations Centre for short periods during crises, until long-term sustainment personnel could be put in place.
- forward deployed support to NATO force commanders at key mission moments (absent in operations such as Pakistan relief effort, Ocean Shield counter-piracy, and ISAF).
- forward deployed capacity building support in mission areas (this would have been of real value for the NATO Training Mission in Iraq, and in ISAF, including for Afghan security forces).
- an immediate stand-up capability for commanders and deployed forces (an asset that would have been invaluable in the initial stages of Operation Unified Protector).
- certifying and enhancing communications capability in the NATO Response Force, Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, NATO Corps-level HQs, and the NATO Force Integration Units.
- supporting major NATO exercises involving deployed forces in austere environments.
- conducting Target Audience Analysis.
- providing an immediately available PSYOPS Element (PSE) capability.
- conducting functional capability assessment and audits on StratCom disciplines in NATO nations and partners.
- targeted Command-level training and NATO-certified media training.
- significantly enhanced media monitoring, assessment and analysis capability Alliance-wide.
- the possibility of providing publishing, printing, website hosting, social media services, and digital (image, video, audio) storage and distribution services for NATO for use by all member and partner nations.²¹
- a global media and social network database to inform situational awareness.
- NATO radio

A commonly-funded capability such as a JCAT early in the ISAF mission may well have been instrumental in addressing and mitigating the effect of many or most of the critical communication requirements and deficiencies identified throughout the campaign. The opportunity to deploy components of this type of asset as needed would have made for a better coordinated effort amongst deployed HQs in ISAF, particularly at the Regional Command level; better imagery collection and distribution; enhanced pre-deployment battle staff training; provided in-theatre surge support; and have allowed an early, major capacity building effort with Afghan government and institutions, including the national army, police, provincial government and ministry officials.

A row of NATO medals is laid out on a dark red surface. The medals are gold and feature the NATO emblem. They are attached to blue and white striped ribbons. A large green circular graphic is overlaid on the top right of the image, containing the chapter title.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

Photo: NATO

“Conventional bureaucracies and military establishments are uncomfortable with modern means of communication and need to understand and exploit them much better if they are to have any chance of remaining ahead of groups such as Al-Qaeda and its many offshoots.”

General Sir David Richards¹

A thought experiment to conclude, if you will. NATO Ambassadors have asked intrepid Alliance observers to brief the North Atlantic Council on the following:

“Given a blank slate, how would one structure and organise NATO communication-related capabilities at a strategic-level headquarters to realise optimal communications campaign outcomes in today’s information environment? Does that conceptual model seeking best strategic effect look the same for the political-military NATO HQ in Brussels as it does for a military headquarters like at SHAPE in Mons, or at a deployed theatre-level HQ like the ISAF? And does that model hold true during all periods of routine activity at static HQs up to and including deterrence and reassurance measures, and for periods of active operations up to and including combat, as was the case during the ISAF mission?”

The observers are told that several key assumptions apply: they are to start from scratch, untrammelled by any of the bugaboos or accumulated burdens of the various communication and information functions’ doctrines, policies, reporting relationships, hierarchy, histories and personalities; maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance will be the political Centre of Gravity at all times and at all points along the spectrum of conflict; and organising for success is the imperative, so ‘everything is on the table’. The undertaking should be informed by modern-day Alliance operations including those in the Balkans, a humanitarian relief mission in Pakistan, the disruption of counter-terrorist activity in the Mediterranean, counter-piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden, the air campaign over Libya and the decade-plus-long mission in Afghanistan.

Relevant lessons should also be drawn from the 2003 Iraq War (in which 19 of the current 28 NATO nations publicly acknowledge taking part); the Russian incursion into Ukraine which the SACEUR has called “the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare;”² and, the coalition effort against Daesh/ISIL.

1
 1 *Taking Command*, p. 339.

2 Quoted in <http://www.stripes.com/news/saceur-allies-must-prepare-for-russia-hybrid-war-1.301464>

In part, this is begrudging acknowledgement of a tectonic shift in contemporary conflict in which adversaries once widely mocked outside and inside their country for ineffectual communications during conflict have become astute and prolific actors in that space. The ubiquitous presence of social media and the potential for virtually instantaneous world-wide broadcast of user-generated content including imagery from almost anywhere in the world poses many challenges, but also fabulous opportunities to reach segmented target audiences as never before.

Given those conditions, the brief to NATO Ambassadors might proceed along these lines:

“An ideal construct acknowledges that in a 24/7 global information environment with multiple security threats directly and indirectly affecting all 28 NATO members and its 41 partners, there is no information effect off-time,” begins the briefer. “Strategic Communications is not a pop-up shop that can be established for a defined period after a crisis hits, then gets shut down and put away when the immediate urgency has passed. You can’t surge trust³, and you can’t surge relationships. Understanding is built over time through a two-way exchange, not a one-way transmission. In communications the only difference in approach during peace, tension or war is mainly a question of degree, focus and intensity of effort.

The optimal situation envisions a Whole-of-all-Headquarters (WOAH) effort, informed by a single overarching political communication policy that sets out strategic guidelines for all the associated functions and activities affecting the information environment. All military policy and doctrine would be similarly joined up, facilitating capability and capacity building in nations and enhancing training. The three principles of unity of command, unity of effort and efficiency of effort, inform us that all capabilities with a direct effect and bearing on the information environment should be grouped together. In military HQs, those functions responsible for actions including fire and manoeuvre would be closely connected. Accountability and responsibility for this group would be vested in one person with authority to provide direction to this cluster of functions. This individual would ideally be of equivalent rank (military) or level (civilian) as the Head of Operations, and be the best, hand-picked person for the job. Within a military HQ this position would be viewed as a career stepping-stone to further promotion and be massively competed for by the best generals in the force.

The rest of the team would consist of trained, experienced, skilled practitioners in each of their respective disciplines. Like other specialist occupations, staff would be drawn from member nations, all having established professional branches of practitioners in the various fields. Social science research would be the foundation of their considerable knowledge of adversaries and potential adversaries. This robust capability would be matched by capacity in nations and at NATO HQs that was highly expeditionary. The best of the private sector would be enlisted to help collect data, conduct analysis, train, and assist with video and Web content creation.

Credibility would be the watchword. Like any good Commander, these staff would be astute enough to separate public communications designed to inform and educate from activities targeted at adversaries to influence their will or change behaviour. This means mechanisms, structures and processes would exist to share information, best practices, tools, and methodologies from all quarters to coordinate actions effectively – building bridges, not firewalls. At military HQs, StratCom would be seamlessly integrated with the targeting function that creates effect including through lethal means. And operations would be planned with knowledge of target audiences, and begin with an articulation of the desired communication, information and influence effect so that kinetic actions are balanced with inform, influence and persuade activities. In this way, actions match words.

At NATO HQ nations would embed a StratCom mind-set into committees responsible for policy formulation, planning, and decision-making. StratCom Frameworks with well-researched and compelling narratives would be the standard means of providing direction and guidance for every operation. Nations would contribute to the work of the Committee on Public Diplomacy with senior representation. Acknowledging that this work is *fundamental* to the Alliance's political Centre of Gravity, NATO and its nations would understand that better outcomes require an investment in better capabilities and therefore invest more thoughtfully in the function: this might mean 3,098 Joint Strike fighters, not 3,100. A Media Operations Centre would be structured and run as a 'War Room' with staff capacity to continuously conduct functions like assessment, media analysis (not just media monitoring), and brilliant content development including for social media and the Web. NATO Information Offices in the Middle East, Africa and Asia would be instrumental at establishing networks and building understanding and relationships with media, stakeholders, think-tanks and civil society. StratCom disciplines would be recognised as a Smart Defence capability investment until core competencies and substantive capacity was established in member nations."

“In summary,” says the briefer, “Strategic Communications would be a mindset with defined processes and real capabilities. As an activity line it would be an active partner of strategy with communication effect very much central to planning and decision-making, not merely a function that communicates decisions.”

On account of other pressing business there is only time for one last question. The Secretary General uses the Chair’s privilege to ask, “How, then, does this ideal situation compare to the reality that was the NATO-led ISAF campaign from 2003-2014?” A nervous hush fills the room.

“Leaving aside all discussion of policy choices and operational execution considerations,” the briefer begins, “let me focus exclusively on the communications campaign. For more than a decade, senior political and military leaders at NATO HQs diligently, actively and capably communicated about the ISAF mission in countless forums. However, they and nations let the communications community thrash around on their own to try resolving their genuine, complex policy issues including, for instance, the ethics and even legislative provisions in some countries around inform versus influence activities. Six years in, at the mission’s nadir, the North Atlantic Council agreed a StratCom policy to guide the communication functions but did not insist on, or support the development of the instruments to turn that into tangible effect. The NATO Strategic Concept, a core document, does not mention the transformation of the information environment, its effect on operations or how the Alliance would adapt its communications to more effectively engage audiences. Nor are the StratCom disciplines part of the NATO Defence Planning Process.

The information environment literally transformed during the time that NATO fought the ISAF campaign. During this time there was a paradigm shift of how information including imagery could be obtained, collated, processed and distributed. The advent of broadband, wireless, satellite and smart phone technology fuelled social media, the fastest growing communications channel in history. This should have been a catalyst for reflection and discussion about how to change structure, capabilities, reporting relationships, and information release authorities.

Instead, in response to the challenges and opportunities presented by those developments, nations insisted on zero nominal growth and then zero real growth within the responsible NATO Division and at the Allied Command HQs.

This no-growth policy applied to communications at a time when the insurgency in Afghanistan metastasized, when the quality and impact of the adversary campaign became more apparent, when the influence campaign in theatre didn't realise desired outcomes, and as NATO members' domestic audiences grew restless and desirous of information and engagement. Nations agreed to a one-Alliance approach, received more than sufficient communications guidance from NATO, and then undertook what amounted to individual efforts and national communication campaigns particular to their domestic audiences to build support for their initial engagement and to sustain the campaign. At a certain level this was understandable, but its persistence undercut NATO.

Three years into the NATO-led Afghanistan campaign, headquarters at Brussels and Mons essentially *started* the communications effort from scratch. More than a year later, the leader of the world's most powerful military Alliance in history was publicly lamenting it still could not get photos or video from theatre to support the communications effort. Nations refused to share information even with COMISAFs who weren't part of the "Five Eyes" community. In 2010, the head of ISAF intelligence called its work "only marginally relevant to the overall strategy"; this was eight years into the war. The information classification system featured dozens of security markings, including NATO UNCLASSIFIED, making it difficult to share and release information about the mission. Nations pressured NATO to more actively explain the mission, but abdicated their own responsibilities.

It let stand Peacetime and Crisis Establishments that everyone knew were seriously under-strength. Almost all NATO nations refused to professionalise their communications disciplines, instead gambling mostly on enthusiastic general service officers to fashion, lead and conduct inform, influence and persuade campaigns in the most complex operation the Alliance had ever attempted. Illustrative of this overall assessment, it finally accredited a NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence four months before the end of the ISAF mission, and mainly in response to the Russia/Ukraine situation."

"Of course," finishes the briefer, "that is leaving aside any issues of policy and operational execution."

Is it any wonder then, why communications campaigns continue to be the subject of lamentation and angst? The only real surprise is how in ISAF, NATO managed as well as it did, and with the positive outcomes it obtained in the end.

This report has been an effort to tell that story.

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