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THE BIRTH AND COMING OF AGE OF NATO STRATCOM: A PERSONAL HISTORY

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About the Author

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> There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more per-ilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.
>
> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Perilous is perhaps too strong a word for an endeavour that did not involve actually getting shot at, although some metaphorical back-stabbing was an occupational hazard, and it could be a career killer. Nevertheless, Machiavelli's quote is largely apt. His work *The Prince*—often seen as a textbook for cynical and cunning manipulation, hence Machiavellian—was in fact a world-weary body of advice to a young prince on the realities of rule. As such his warning about the perils of 'change management' is an all too accurate description of the project that has been bringing Strategic Communications (StratCom) into the heart of NATO.

The final approval of a military StratCom policy, MC0628, in 2017 marked the key turning point, the culmination of a 10-year debate, where special interests, turf fights, principles, traditional thinking, old habits, and new challenges had clashed over what StratCom was, should be, how it should be done, and even whether it should exist. Some even wanted the term dispensed with altogether.

And while the internal battle raged, externally the information world kept changing and our adversaries continued to move forward. Of course, one of those adversaries was, and is, the Taliban. The Alliance experience in Afghanistan was a driver for NATO StratCom, and our recent defeat makes it all the more important we learn some lessons. I also reflect that the time and effort wasted on internal arguments with those who failed to adapt to the new realities could have been focussed so much better on fighting the real enemy.

This is a personal history of that project; it is infused with a degree of passion and even anger as I wish we could and should have done better in that fight. Some may challenge my views, but it is also an authoritative version, for when it comes to NATO StratCom, I was there in the beginning and involved in virtually everything that would follow. Other articles I have written focus more on the external aspects of StratCom, but here I look more at its internal development, and struggles over policy, doctrine, and structures.

At the outset I should acknowledge there is nothing new about highlighting that the power of communication has always been critical for the military. As Napoleon is often quoted as saying, 'Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.' He was also far from the first to realise that.

In the same way, communications and information in various forms—Public Affairs and Psychological Operations—have always been a part of NATO, but StratCom represented a step change in both the art of influence and in its importance. Every technical information revolution, the Gutenberg press, the telegraph, radio, television, represented a step change that saw communication become ever more important within our societies. In our time the internet supercharged that process with a further step change that has changed the nature of the relationship between ruler and ruled, and also democratised information technology, making it a tool for everyone.

That historical context is important because StratCom should be seen not just as another technological development or fancy phrase but as a reflection of and response to the fact we are now in the Information Age. Getting NATO—communication practitioners as well as leaders—to take on board its full implications has been at the heart of the StratCom endeavour: truly a new order of things. So, the focus of this work is on the story up to the point at which the organisation as a whole firmly realised the need for change and started moving to implement this new order of things. It remains a work in progress and the story continues.

Inevitably, there is something arbitrary about identifying such a start point. But clearly for StratCom that point was NATO's engagement in Afghanistan, more specifically 2006 when the Afghan mission moved from peace support to counter-insurgency.

Until then there had been straws in the wind, notably the Kosovo conflict, but not enough to really change things. Kosovo revealed the failings of NATO public affairs, but its extent was to a large degree hidden by the brilliant performance of Jamie Shea, the then NATO Spokesman.

Nevertheless, the chaotic nature of NATO HQ's Office of Public Information was up to a point addressed. However, it is not to downplay the reforms that followed to say they were focussed on doing public affairs better rather than on changing the nature of the game. The same applied to the more limited changes made to military communication.

A number of the mini-crises that followed both validated the reforms that had been made and left those of us involved with an uneasy sense of their fragility, if truly stress-tested. And when it came to Afghanistan, so it would prove.

NATO's initial entry into Afghanistan, taking leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from August 2003, was a little bumpy but overall went well. It was aided because NATO was at first taking over the then easy parts of the country to the North and West. It was when the Alliance moved into the restive South, soon to be the site of an active insurgency, that the wheels started to come off the wagon.

However, one event just before then proved to be a major storm warning. The worldwide protests and riots over the 2005 publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper led to an assault in 2006 on the NATO base in Maimana in Northern Afghanistan. A demonstration turned violent, and the Norwegian base was nearly over-run. In the light of the later conflict, it looks minor, but at the time, it was seen as a major issue at the highest level.

The key point here was that NATO's handling of it was woeful. Slow passage of information, confusion between the political and military sides of the Alliance, little coordination, and mixed, albeit often helpful messaging. Everyone tried, but everyone failed. Never again, said the then-Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer who felt NATO HQ, which was meant to be in charge, had nevertheless been let down.

One consequence was that, at the Secretary General's request, I was taken in May 2006 from my SHAPE job as Chief of Public Affairs and sent to Afghanistan. The Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe

(SHAPE) is the strategic military HQ that commands all NATO military operations. My role in Afghanistan though was not with SHAPE but NATO HQ, the political HQ that gives SHAPE its orders. I would be the NATO spokesman and media adviser to the ISAF commander but working direct to NATO rather than having to go through the multi-layered military chain of command. It was a reprise in many ways of a role I had already performed in 2001 in what is now North Macedonia.

That role too had been a crisis response to a breakdown in the Public Affairs effort following the death of a British soldier, which after that tragedy threatened to undermine NATO's Operation Essential Harvest at a critical time.[1] I had already been sent from my post as Deputy Spokesman at NATO HQ to be an adviser to the Macedonian president but was moved across to be a NATO spokesman and adviser to the operational commander.

In both instances it suggested that, whatever the qualities of individuals, the system as it stood was simply not up to handling a major crisis at either the operational or strategic level. Whenever placed under stress, it broke.

A DIFFICULT BIRTH

Now in 2006 the Alliance's communicators were about to face the biggest challenge in NATO's history, and one in which the information element was central to success. For, on the one hand we had to maintain support over the long haul from NATO nations with varying and often lukewarm viewpoints, while on the other we needed to gain and maintain the support of Afghans who both distrusted and often dislike foreigners. Force alone was not going to win this one.

NATO had led ISAF, a grouping of NATO & non-NATO nations, since 2003. Initially ISAF's mandate had been restricted to securing Kabul, enabling a stable space for the new Afghan national government;

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1 Operation Essential Harvest was the ultimately highly successful NATO mission to oversee the disarming of an insurgent force as part of an overall peace deal.

it was effectively a peace support mission, where weapons were more for self-defence than for active combat.

However, over the next few years it had expanded to commanding the international forces in the north and west, then also fairly peaceful areas, but in 2006 it was slated to take over, first, the south, and then the east. The south was more restive; it had been the heartland of the Taleban and increasingly there were worrying indications of rising violence. ISAF was still seen as a peace support mission, but it was accepted the task ahead was more challenging—just how much more was not then realised.

The military headquarters appointed to command as this expansion took place was from the British-led Allied Rapid Reaction Corp (ARRC), which deployed from May 2006 until February 2007 as ISAF 9, the ninth HQ to command the ISAF mission since it was launched in 2001. I had been involved in their build up and can state they were commendably aware of the information Line of Effort (LoE). In some ways they were also ahead of the game in that their communicators were part of a Joint Effects (JE) branch, which meant they saw the information effort as integrated with other more traditional military effects such as direct combat.

At the same time JE was really a variation on the Operations branch— in military organisation known as J3—and the communicators were too far down the chain of command, making them subordinate to too many others. To succeed the communicators needed their own place at the top table, not to rely on others speaking for them. I had already forced the ARRC to 'go NATO' and have their Chief Public Affairs Officer (CPAO) report direct to the commander, so that was already progress. Nevertheless, the ARRC had at least grasped the importance of information and its need to integrate as a part of the overall effort.

From the standpoint of 2021, this may seem obvious. But it was not so common in 2006 when—whatever was claimed to the contrary— communicators were mostly an afterthought, called in later to explain (or explain away) what had previously been decided without involving them.

So, the ARRC was better prepared than most but what happened was still a shock. Given the primary purpose of this article, there is not the space here to describe fully what happened, but we quickly realised we were on the back foot.

It started with a disconnect between our narrative and the reality. The assumption and associated message was that ISAF was in a robust Peace Support mission, when the reality was we were entering a full-blown counter-insurgency (COIN)—a quite different and more dangerous beast that our publics and politicians were not ready for.

We also had a gap in our Information Environment Assessment (IEA)—we really lacked knowledge of our audiences on the ground. The regional information set-ups were also poorly connected to us, often limited, and working to their nations' frequently differing priorities. The linkages between the differing communication disciplines were weak, as were our links to other parts of the international communies' communication effort, while within the ARRC our own resources and expertise were limited.

All this ignored the weak Afghan government communications effort. Within the main urban areas this mattered less as the anti-Taliban attitudes were strong, but in the countryside where attitudes were more mixed it was vital. The end result was that Taliban were driving the narrative on the ground. At the same time our own home audiences' support for the ISAF mission was vulnerable, often driven by stories over which we had little influence.

We quickly realised that, in a counter-insurgency with its complex information environment, our traditional military-orientated focus and structure was simply not cutting it. The buzzword, or phrase, of the time was the 'comprehensive approach', a blending of military and civilian lines of effort. Frankly, this rarely happened in practice for all the public nods towards it. Many nations fought shy of using the COIN term—it was too like acknowledging we were in a war. Ironically, as effective COIN also blends military and civilian lines of effort, the overlap

with the politically more acceptable 'comprehensive approach' term is considerable.

Of note, the contemporary focus on so-called 'hybrid conflict', a broad mix of activities ranging from combat to disinformation, not only overlooks the fact it is not really so new, but that counter-insurgency is inherently a form of 'hybrid' conflict. There is much to learn from COIN history.

The ARRC has always been a thinking institution, so instead of battering on, we analysed the dilemma among the communicators. What we came up with includes many of the core elements that eventually characterised MC0628 (Military Committee 0628), which is the guiding Military Policy document for StratCom within NATO's military.

It is sometimes galling to think that we might have advanced the StratCom project by several years to make the Ukraine crisis of 2014 a place where a fully formed StratCom might have actually made its mark, instead of it being merely the final catalyst for its full introduction. Of that, more later.

Back then in 2006 we had whiteboarded the problem, and a photograph was taken of the outcome. I still have it and if anything marks the beginning of StratCom in NATO that is it.

For the rest of our tour, we tried to apply the thinking; I believe with some success, although it must be recognised ISAF 9 was just one of many actors, military and civilian, and often not the most powerful. Thus, a number of initiatives were launched:

- The existing military Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) group, although nominally part of ISAF, operated separately and was therefore dragged into cooperation, rather than remaining an independent actor.

- ISAF set up a new section, focussing on cultural issues and including communicators, to work with traditional Afghan actors, such as tribal elders and mullahs.

- ISAF led on creating a working group to coordinate international communicators such as national embassies and the UN.

- StratCom was made one of the core elements within the so-called Policy Action Group (PAG), a new joint international/Afghan group, to try to set priorities and simplify implementation of over-all strategy. I myself was an adviser to the Afghan government's information minister, highlighting the attempt to work more closely with the Afghan government.

ISAF's communications record is mixed to say the least, but ISAF 9, in 2006–7, did better than most, and even more importantly laying some foundations for future developments.

FROM KABUL TO MONS

All the same, by the time I returned I knew as communicators we were not fit for the communication fight. Our structures divided not united; our policies, doctrines, and processes tended to marginalise communications both within the disciplines and from the wider headquarters. Our training was woeful, with good people too often thrown into operations, to learn on the job, trying to pick up skills unrelated to the common experience of these military officers.

Concepts such as strategic narrative were little appreciated, our ability to understand cultures and how to speak to them even less so. The requirement for information effects (the StratCom term was still relatively novel within the military) could vary wildly from being a belated afterthought to having unrealistic expectations of quickly influencing unpalatable effects on the ground—what some wearily called 'sprinkling more information fairy dust'. Having learnt painfully on the job, that team of communicators would leave at the end of its tour for the next, new team to start the cycle all over again.

All of this was played out tour after tour in ISAF and played its part in the disappointments that followed and in the current outcome. Some significant progress at times showed what could be done.

ISAF had its good periods and they always coincided with effective StratCom as a part of the success. StratCom could not do it on its own, but it was an essential part of any successful team. But any success was never translated into a steady march forward. The lessons were observed more than applied, and when applied the process was too episodic and never sustained.

When challenged about the level of effort put into policy, doctrine, and structures, rather than supposedly just dealing with the here and now, I have always replied that an agreed policy, doctrine, and structures were like the foundations of a house. Improvised answers to the immediate problem never lasted past a change of personnel.

At the Political/Military and Strategic levels, as well as on the ground, there was no disagreement over NATO having a serious communications problem. There was, however, no agreement on what to do about it. But with Afghanistan being far and away the biggest game in town, changes at all organisational levels focused on helping NATO improve there. Until Russia's aggression in Ukraine, ISAF would remain a major driver and testing ground for StratCom development.

Another factor played in at this point. When I went to Kabul, I had been SHAPE's Chief of Public Affairs, but within a few months of my return in spring 2007, I would become SHAPE's Chief Strategic Communications (CSC), the first specifically StratCom named position anywhere in NATO's structure. The circumstances of the post's creation were distinctly messy, more improvised than planned, while the job requirement was at first more than a little vague. Regardless of the nature of the start, the timing was right. StratCom now had a formal champion, certainly for the military level and, given the close links with NATO HQ in Brussels, also an advocate at the political/military level.

As Chief StratCom, my first significant task, alongside communication-related colleagues in SHAPE, Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFCB), the International Military Staff (IMS), and NATO Public Diplomacy Division (PDD), was to help develop a communications strategy for Afghanistan.

Called the 'Action Plan on NATO's Strategic Communications' it was really misnamed as noted in a Command Group Point Paper of July 2007, 'While labelled as a StratCom document it would be more accurately seen as an Action Plan on PI (Public Information) Resourcing'. It was also noted that it was nevertheless valuable, and while its specific proposals mainly focused on public affairs it also called, in broad terms, for more coordination and capacity building, and a 21st century communication capability.

So, for all its limitations, it remains an important document. It nibbled away at the edges of StratCom—placing civilian/military joint planning at a higher, more strategic level, and highlighting the need for more resources, and deep cooperation with the Afghan government. Its omissions also showed how much needed to be done, including its separating planning from policy, no awareness of Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), and focus on tactical actions that would have been better delegated to those on the ground.

It also took far, far too long. An original draft produced in mid-April 2007 was only finally approved in late autumn. Neither in the longer-term did many of the requirements for better training and resourcing actually happen. The paper was better than the outcome. Plus ça change.

Still, it was a start.

Meantime, StratCom's supporters were also trying to put more flesh on the bones of NATO StratCom, born as it was in such an improvised manner. Virtually everyone accepted there was a problem, but was StratCom the answer, and indeed what was StratCom?

DEBATING WHAT WAS STRATCOM

At SHAPE, initially on a temporary basis, I was supported by a single PSYOPS officer, moved from the existing 2-person PSYOPS cell, and a British RAF Regiment officer who moved over after some internal changes in SHAPE made him redundant from his original job. Their excellence and enthusiasm were a boon, but a small acorn from which

to grow the oak tree, mighty or not. Elsewhere the status quo was still a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) reporting direct to the commander. The PAO was detached from PSYOPS and InfoOps sections that were mostly tiny and largely impotent in the bowels of J3 Operations. Any coordination and synergy were nominal. Effectively the communication effort was stovepiped.

So, we faced an acknowledged but ill-defined problem, the extent and nature of which was debated: no policy, no doctrine, no structure, and significant resistance from some communicators and operators up and down the chain of command who wanted to stick to the old ways.

NATO Headquarters, under a previous Secretary General, Lord Robertson (1999–2003), had responded to the information conundrum at the political level by creating the Public Diplomacy Division—ramming together the previous Office of Information with the Scientific Affairs Division. It was a distinctly pragmatic approach driven by internal politics, that nevertheless elevated information from a lowly office to the status of a division. The pragmatism extended to its internal organisation, and the coordination the division was intended to manage had often been circumscribed by the personalities of those involved.

Such issues meant building StratCom in NATO has always had two Lines of Effort: Internally, where development involved a degree of campaigning within NATO and its nations to institute change; externally, fighting to prove StratCom could make a difference in using information to achieve NATO's objectives. Demonstrating such effects was ultimately more important because facing up to the external challenge is in the end what matters.

Sometimes though, NATO's internal opponents of StratCom seemed to regard StratCom as a bigger threat than its external opponents. Such internal rivalries are common to most large institutions and this kind of turf fight was a danger I tried to ensure StratCom's advocates did not fall prey to. You could not ignore the internal debate, but our best argument had always been to demonstrate how implementing StratCom could help

the whole organisation succeed. It was a balance, as developing the mindset and creating the structures, policies, and systems needed to integrate a new capability into the NATO system was both necessary and time-consuming.

Notable here is the way NATO StratCom's development was so often driven from the middle rather than the top. Firstly, in terms of both rank and position within the chain of command, and secondly by operational experience rather than the strategic level or theories. Thus, the primary effort at the time and subsequently came not from senior generals or civil servants at NATO HQ, but people like myself (a civilian equivalent to a brigadier), and colonels and majors or civilian equivalents. This reflected the reality that, although StratCom was acknowledged as an issue needing high level attention, getting focus and time was hard. Given this, the level of progress achieved is all the more noteworthy and, according to your viewpoint, praiseworthy.

At the same time, it was NATO corps-level military headquarters returning from ISAF who were most open to change. It was not just the ARRC. Notably 1 German Netherlands Corp (1GNC) under the innovative and inspiring leadership of Lt Gen Ton Van Loon. He, using his Afghan experience, was an early adopter in creating a Communication and Engagement Division in 1GNC.

The general indication of high-level support was forthcoming, but it was often vague, sometimes contradictory and lacking sufficiently specific Direction & Guidance (D&G). This reflected uncertainties over the StratCom concept and debates within nations. It was an easy buzzword and much used to cover anything information related. However, those lower down were left to fight it out, not on the basis of clear direction but their more personal viewpoints. This had its upsides and downsides—it gave room for innovative thinking and personal initiative, but it could also reduce the debate to a dogfight over turf.

At SHAPE, noting the slow and meandering pace of the NATO HQ debate, we decided to utilise the considerable authorities held by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in his role as commander

of ACO (Allied Command Operations), NATO's senior operational command, to move forward with proposals on structures and principles to reflect the new Chief StratCom role. A November 2007 Point Paper to SACEUR, that I drafted and was approved, summarised the previous months' work: 'COS (Chief of Staff) directed that CSC develop Strategic Communications (StratCom) policies and plans coordinated with ACT and NATO, and within ACO with Public Affairs (PA), InfoOps and PsyOps.'

It continued: 'Strategic Communications is a new concept for NATO, and the subject of an evolving debate outside the alliance. Although the phrase is commonly used, what is meant by it varies widely, and often it is a catch-all phrase for anything related to an information campaign. However, there is no agreed definition within NATO and a formal attempt to create one is liable to meet resistance from some nations. The post has no equivalent in any other NATO military or civil headquarters. In effect SHAPE is developing the function from a standing start.'

Moreover, the paper argued: 'There is wide acceptance of the importance of StratCom to NATO and the need to handle it in a different and far more effective manner, but not yet agreement on the best way ahead. The task therefore is to produce flexible, innovative working methods and structures alongside fresh ways of thinking that challenge existing approaches. However, given the problem is here and now we need to both address current problems and work out long-term solutions. This will require simultaneous planning and conceptual thinking for the future and a degree of improvisation for today's challenges.'

Looking back from 2021, this still seems a reasonable assessment of the 2007 state of play.

NATO HQ's response had been distinctly mixed. Noting nations were still undecided, some senior figures in PDD (in a June 2007 exchange) wanted to wait until nations had agreed a definition and concept 'before creating any new structures at the strategic command level'. Another ventured: 'I don't think SHAPE is the right place to lead this process.'

I replied that SACEUR was operating within his authorities and that the problem was already critical. We needed to lead not delay, actively propose solutions, not wait for them to emerge. We worked on the principle to keep going until SACEUR or SHAPE Chief of Staff told us to stop.

Alongside work on Afghanistan, we drafted new proposals and structures to give StratCom oversight over the entire communication effort. We briefed widely, and in June 2007 produced 'What is StratCom: An informal guide'. It proposed a NATO military definition: 'To advance the interests, aims and objectives of NATO through the co-ordinated and appropriate use of public diplomacy, public information, information operations and psychological operations.'

By November an early structure was in place within SHAPE involving the small StratCom cell and a high-level StratCom Policy Group and Working Group involving senior staff from other parts of the HQ. Cooperation with other operators within SHAPE was advancing. Absence of authority to actually direct action was the weakness. So, the post relied on cooperation and persuasion. If all this seems SHAPE orientated, it is because at this stage the focus of StratCom development was at SHAPE and there was no equivalent above or below. We were if you like, something of a test bed, as well as leading the way.

With me having deployed to ISAF once more in February 2008, the team continued to work on development as best we could. My second tour revalidated the lessons of the first. Once again good people were let down by poor training, resources, and systems. It further highlighted traditional ways of working were no longer good enough, and even more, without a sustained, systemic change, every rotation into ISAF would reset the clock to close to zero on lessons learned. I returned in the summer even more convinced that we needed to accelerate the hard graft of creating structures, policies, doctrine, and training if we were to produce a sustainable model for effective business rather than rely on individual brilliance or initiative to overcome a poor system.

However, on my return, I sensed the tide was turning. None of the problems had gone away but there was increasing support at different levels for the StratCom project. More communicators were supportive or open-minded along with a wider realisation that urgent change was needed in a transforming information environment. At NATO HQ, the nations were still debating what StratCom was, but whatever it was they wanted some of it.

Once again, SHAPE was in the lead, and once again in order to move forward it utilised SACEUR's broad authorities over NATO's military structure and operations. NATO documents have different levels of authority. A NATO Policy for instance is the top level, having been agreed by nations and is effectively an order applied across and within the Alliance. It is not obligatory for use in national forces operating independently outside NATO structures or operations, but the fact it is still signed off by them all, means it has significant weight and influence. It is therefore also often applied in nations' own policies and activities.

However, given the relatively immature debate at that time, a NATO StratCom policy agreed by all was highly unlikely. However, while a StratCom policy required both NATO HQ and NATO nation sign-off, a SACEUR approved 'directive' did not. Its authority was limited to NATO military headquarters and NATO-led operations; still, that was certainly a significant start.

Having received command group support and sign-off, throughout 2008 we had been drafting a directive that was to become ACO 95-2 on Strategic Communications. The process was complex in that its contents had to account for the existing high-level NATO nation-approved policies on PA, InfoOps, and PSYOPS, which to some degree constrained how forward-looking it could be, making it a waypoint and not a destination. Regardless of its limits, in the absence of any high-level NATO documents on StratCom, any document with SACEUR's authority giving direction would be a big step forward to achieving sustained progress.

As in the previous year, some officials at higher HQ were unhappy, saying we were jumping the gun and should wait for NATO HQ and the nations to give more D&G. However, confident we were operating within the limits of SACEUR's authorities and not exceeding them, we pressed on. ACO 95-2 was released on 15 September 2008, and NATO's military now had some clear direction on applying StratCom.

Others were beginning to move as well. Later that month, General Jim Mattis, Supreme Allied Command Transformation (SACT) in the US, responded to a letter from SACEUR on StratCom capability in Afghanistan. He itemised the practical steps ACT and ACO were taking immediately and with longer-term efforts consistent with 95-2—namely, training, experimentation, and capability development. ACO and ACT were moving.

At NATO HQ, the International Military Staff (IMS), supports the Military Committee that advises the North Atlantic Council, NATO's supreme decision-making body. The IMS was supportive in principle but cautious and worried about blowback from some nations. On NATO's political side, some senior PDD staff argued some nations' resistance to ACO 95-2 could derail StratCom altogether at all levels. PDD wanted an immediate review of 95-2, which really meant withdrawal and rewriting. This also reflected their resentment at not being in the lead and at being pushed from below. Such a review would have effectively stopped any movement on StratCom for months, probably years.

However, highlighting the diversity of the debate, one senior PDD staffer wrote, 'This is an excellent paper, outstandingly well crafted, and presenting a highly articulate and compelling vision of the role of strategic communications within ACO and, by inference, within the NATO context as a whole.'

In hindsight, that is a perhaps generous assessment but indicates the vestigial state of the debate at the time. SHAPE held its ground. The senior PDD official suggested ACO 95-2 as a basis for NATO HQ and that the military move forward together. And so it proved.

Furthermore, the first version of ACO 95-2 identified almost all the issues that have continued to be central to NATO's StratCom efforts and development. It noted the transformed information environment, and the increase in importance of information; it was perhaps most radical in stating, 'Such is the importance in mission success that, on occasion, policies and actions will even need to be adapted in response to the imperatives of Strategic Communication.' In effect, saying StratCom requirements should sometimes be in the lead was heady stuff.

It also was blunt in stating StratCom was meant to contribute to Alliance success, directly confronting the issue of 'inform v influence', which has been at the heart of repeated discussions, especially in the PA community. NATO StratCom should be ethical and embody NATO's values. Yet it was not intended as an information service but rather to help NATO succeed.

That meant embracing discourses around behaviour and narrative: 'Sustainable support for any institution or campaign is founded on both logic and instinct. NATO/ACO therefore needs to ensure that, firstly, it has a narrative that resonates with its audiences, and, secondly, its operations and actions are consistent with that narrative.'

It further laid out guidance on structure and coordination, requiring new approaches and better integration between communicators and across headquarters. Importantly, having cheekily recommended a StratCom definition for NATO, it offered a military one, 'In concert with other military actions and following NATO political guidance, to advance ACO's aims and operations through the co-ordinated, appropriate use of Public Affairs and Information Operations, in co-operation with the Public Diplomacy Division.' It was hardly inspiring, but it said all that needed to be said for future development.

ACO 95-2 achieved a broader purpose: to catalyse progress at the wider NATO level. Those who objected to SHAPE getting ahead of NATO, saying it might derail the process, were wrong. In fact, the reverse happened. The tide was already beginning to turn with nations like the US pushing it more and more, wanting the vague desire for improvement to

be translated into something solid. ACO 95-2 accelerated that, boosting the demand for a NATO HQ policy. It broke the StratCom logjam.

Senior NATO officials who were directly involved told me that the development of and discussions around 95-2 had forced PDD to develop its own policy. One of those in the lead, initially reluctantly, in creating the NATO policy put it bluntly, saying that if there had been no 95-2 there would have been no NATO policy, adding, 'It's your fault.'

SHAPE was certainly keen to see a NATO policy, working closely with NATO HQ as they developed the NATO policy, and many elements of 95-2 were included in the NATO policy. By this time, a small cadre of PDD staff was as keen on StratCom as the SHAPE team. Consequently, the Strasbourg/Kehl NATO Summit of April 2009 delivered a significant boost when its final declaration included, 'Strategic Communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives'.[2]

Remember, at this stage, at the NATO political level there was still no NATO policy, definition, or even agreement on what StratCom was! Significantly, this was the first time the StratCom word had been used at the highest level and so retrospectively validated the earlier release of 95-2 and our driving on to put flesh on the bones of NATO StratCom.

Finally, seven months after NATO's Heads of State and Government had declared StratCom to be integral to the Alliance, on 29 September 2009, PO(2009)0141—NATO Strategic Communications Policy—was passed. NATO actually had a policy. As a policy it was sketchy, but pragmatically it was all the market could bear at that point. Critically, it had a workable definition, 'The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities—Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (InfoOps) and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate—in support of Alliance policies, operations, and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims.'

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2 Article 16. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52837.htm

It codified that the communication disciplines fell under the StratCom umbrella. Furthermore, that the purpose of StratCom was to 'advance NATO's aims'. Interestingly, that critical last dimension—emphasising StratCom was there to achieve an effect to help NATO succeed—was literally added only on the day the document was sent to the Secretary General and the nations for approval. Two staffers, one from NATO, the other from SHAPE, combined to achieve its insertion. Until then the definition effectively said that communicators needed to coordinate, but not why and to what purpose.

Given the often robust 'inform v influence' debate within the information community, this was a critical addition, fundamentally identifying the purpose of StratCom within the institution. Had it not been added, subsequent StratCom development would have been very different; the difficulty of having a policy agreed by NATO nations is nothing compared to the difficulty of having it changed once agreed. That the now dated 2009 policy is still extant tells its own story.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

We now had a definition, policy, military directive, and, for our key mission, a plan. I have focused extensively on these early efforts because they set the direction of travel for all that followed. It could so easily have gone in a different direction or not happened at all.

Initial success had prompted a growing team of StratCom supporters to coalesce, not just in NATO HQ and SHAPE but beyond, in other headquarters and nations. There were now three broad Lines of Effort (LoE): First, to spread the word and grow the community, engaging practitioners and operators who could use StratCom to help them succeed; second, to develop capability and implement newly agreed yet still aspirational policies; third, to demonstrate continually results on the ground, primarily in Afghanistan, and so help build credibility.

The first LoE was often the toughest because you needed support in order to advance the other two. It not only involved breaking down institutional barriers but changing mindsets and strongly held views. Sometimes these

were glorified turf fights, but they were also debates over ethics and purpose. The more traditionalist public affairs officers in particular were sensitive to being involved in what they feared was propaganda, PSYOPS or 'influence'. Amidst the self-interest of those who were content with the current system (see Machiavelli) there were also valid debates to be had. If NATO does not live up to its values, it is nothing.

So, outreach was critical and to that end SHAPE launched an annual conference to involve all security-related communicators, whether civil or military, NATO or NATO nation, PA, InfoOps or PSYOPS. Extraordinarily such a broad-based conference was new with, for instance, PA and PSYOPs holding their own exclusive meetings. It reflected a separation within the disciplines that bred misunderstandings, differences, and perpetuated staying in stovepipes. The first such conference in 2008 had 38 attendees for 1 day; by 2019 what had become the NATO Information and Communicators Conference (NICC), attracted nearly 400, and was now a 'must attend'.

The second LoE, to develop capability, was very much supported by the outreach as NATO StratCom authorities to make things happen were still weak. The implementation of the policies was still pretty much optional, needing the nations to supply resources, notably enough trained personnel, while different NATO headquarters sometimes seemed to regard NATO policies and ACO directives as suggestions rather than D&G. Ultimately, in 2011 the NATO Military Committee agreed the NATO Strategic Communications Military Capability Implementation Plan (CIP), laying the way ahead for StratCom development.

The third Line of Effort, to deliver effects on the ground, was still primarily Afghan focussed. Supporting ISAF still took up the bulk of our time and remained a proving ground for StratCom ideas and activities. It was ISAF that led to another key and enduring StratCom development—the StratCom Framework.

It was part of the response to ISAF's worst crisis in 2008/9. Over much of this period the Taliban were making significant ground, both politically

and militarily, and both ISAF and the Afghan government's credibility was falling with a growing crisis of trust and support, internationally and within Afghanistan. Part of that response was the replacement of the then ISAF commander with General Stan McChrystal. At the same time, the alarmed US and NATO governments were ordering an urgent review and new plan to deal with the crisis.

The so-called McChrystal Plan was wide-ranging, including large force increases, and was also unusual in the way McChrystal sought inputs from actors outside the usual circle. It also had a substantial StratCom section, which was well-integrated into the overall plan. In a SHAPE StratCom briefing to McChrystal the state of play was summed up: Afghan support for ISAF was positive but declining; international support for ISAF amounted to unenthusiastic tolerance; there were capacity and coordination issues at all StratCom levels; and the Taleban lacked positive support, but their information campaign was having a significant negative impact on both ISAF and the Afghan government. One conclusion was that there was confusion as to why ISAF/NATO was there.

In his report to the nations, McChrystal was blunt, warning of the risk of defeat, calling for a change of approach as well as more resources and noting early in his summary, 'Further, a perception that our resolve is uncertain makes Afghans reluctant to align with us against the insurgents.'

There were also multiple references to the contest of wills; while adversaries needed to be influenced by ISAF's actions on the ground, the conflict was 'a war of ideas and perceptions'. Strategic Communications received its own annex, stating, 'The information domain is a battlespace…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.'

NATO and its nations, having had a brutal reality check, accepted the plan, and committed to providing substantial extra resources, the majority American, in what was generally known as 'the surge'. The major caveat that caused huge dismay in the international community within

Afghanistan was Obama's announcement of a time limit on the surge, with the extra troops being withdrawn a few years down the line. The general consensus was that the positive news of the extra commitment was undermined by the deadline indicating a lack of sustained resolve for the reasons highlighted above by McChrystal.

But, regardless, we had to make the best of it. For NATO's communicators the challenge was to translate this broad, strategic intent into communication guidance supporting all levels and all nations—and at speed. Drawing on existing best practice within the various disciplines and the fresher StratCom thinking, we produced the first StratCom Framework.

The intent was to produce a 'golden thread' linking the political/military intent with the tactical level implementers to help them in simple terms understand the overarching aim. For me it was consciously a form of StratCom 'Mission Command'.

Mission Command is a military term and reflects a philosophy of command that gives top-level intent but leaves how that intent is translated into action to the man or woman on the ground. As such it emphasises getting the whole team to understand what is wanted but empowering them to decide how best to do it. It assumes delegation of authority driven by an awareness that in large operations you have many actors who need to be involved at many levels, so micromanagement or tight control is impractical creating friction, inflexibility, and slowness.

Frameworks encapsulate much of what good StratCom is about—clarity of aim, coupled with well-trained staff empowered to find the best way to achieve the aim. Notably, the framework template was created in a couple of days by a couple of people, and the first operational framework for ISAF in little more time. Once again, urgent necessity was the mother of invention. That first framework, as with others that followed, was developed in close alignment with and to support the overall strategy. That initial template has stood the test of time and is still basically in use and incorporated into core documents.

This is not the place to go into the details of frameworks, but their importance is considerable because they put in place the core element of a StratCom process. Processes are often looked down upon but in organisations of any size the alternative to consistent, effective process is chaos. The framework reflects many of the key principles of StratCom and provides an easily understood template giving essential guidance to practitioners and operators at all levels.

Throughout the military staff system, standardised staff work is seen as essential to produce a base of common understanding and working practices among soldiers of widely varying knowledge and training at different levels and circumstances.

Frameworks also proved hugely useful in increasing StratCom coordination with nations. A framework was exactly that, a framework not a fully formed plan. And that broad approach made it easier to create a common start point for nations to develop their own plans—more harmonised with NATO but still adapted and tailored to their national needs.

In ISAF terms, this co-operative and co-ordinated approach perhaps reached its peak in a StratCom conference in Dubai in 2011. There leading communicators from ISAF contributors and the Afghan government met and went through a NATO draft line by line to produce a common framework to take back to their nations. National leaderships were not tied to it, but it was still a strong base for common action, and many did or at least adapted it. At the same time, every level of NATO & ISAF's military was working to the same document.

For all ISAF's failings I would argue the period immediately following the McChrystal plan was one of the high points, and over this period StratCom was at its most coherent in that the strategy, narrative, and communications effort were the most aligned and effective.

FROM AFGHANISTAN TO UKRAINE

So, with the Dubai conference we could say we were working to an at least partly shared understanding of StratCom, using a common framework, coordinated across nations, militaries, and civilian structures, integrating messaging and activities intended to influence events towards a strategic goal set at the highest level. The outcomes may not have matched the aspirations, but the direction of travel was at least coherent.

But in the years that followed those first StratCom Frameworks, the SHAPE Directive, and the new NATO StratCom Policy, we also saw the continuing stresses and strains both within nations and within the communication community as we tried to take the project forward.

The biggest objections to StratCom came from the PA community for a number of reasons. Partly they objected to anything that might reduce their direct access to the commander. PA policy stated the Chief PAO worked direct to the commander, an unusual and much prized benefit giving relatively junior officers routine access to the most senior officer in the headquarters.

Evolving StratCom policy gave the Chief StratCom the same direct access along with other special advisers, such as the Legal Adviser. PAOs feared grouping the communication disciplines within a StratCom body would restrict their access.

Additionally, many PAOs disagreed with working closely with PSYOPS, saying their relationships with the media would be undermined by a closer association with PSYOPs as they were regarded by the media as manipulators and propagandists.

This went to the heart of the debate about 'influence v inform'. The most conservative PAs said they were purely passers on of information and had no role in trying to influence audiences, and this essentially neutral position was the basis of their relationship with journalists.

The 'inform v influence' issue is in many respects at the philosophical core of what StratCom is about. Are we part of the wider Alliance team,

contributing to desired outcomes as directed by NATO's leadership, or are we a glorified information agency? It was not so long ago that we had Public Information Officers and there was an animated debate about even changing it to Public Affairs.

I regard the 'inform v influence' argument as an intellectual rabbit hole. All information influences and imagining we can inform without influencing is a cop-out. Trying to draw some unsustainable line between informing and influencing avoids the far more taxing issue of what I regard as 'ethical influencing'—working in that grey zone of trying to influence without sliding into manipulation or distortion.

So, during the long journey to today's StratCom the primary opposition came from PAOs, especially from the US and, to a significant but lesser degree, from Germany. That phase of the StratCom struggle lasted until the Russian aggression in Crimea precipitated the next stage in its evolution. It would be tedious to go through them all, so I have chosen one incident as emblematic of the issues—the so-called George Little letter of November 2012.

As noted above the StratCom debate within US defence was intense, involving issues of principle, policy, and a lot of good old-fashioned turf fighting. To continue the quote from Machiavelli at the head of this work, 'the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.' Behavioural psychologists routinely note people fight harder to keep what they have than to get something new, or as Machiavelli put it, 'whenever those who are hostile have the opportunity to attack they do it like partisans, whilst the others defend lukewarmly.'

In 2012 George Little was Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and in a one-page memorandum on 28 November 2012 he attempted to kill StratCom. Noting StratCom was intended to synchronise communication efforts across the DoD, he claimed experience had shown it added staffing layers and blurred responsibilities, causing confusion. He concluded by saying the term Strategic Communications

would henceforth be replaced by 'communication synchronization', mostly to be carried out by Public Affairs using working groups and steering groups and with no additional staffing.

Little had limited background in communications and his memo was poorly drafted, of arguable authority, and, ironically, was more of a PA coup d'état than an example of the synchronised communication he espoused. American colleagues told me of celebrations among US PA officers, especially those who advised Little, at having 'killed' StratCom. Also of note, the memo had been preceded by leaks to the US media about how bad StratCom was—for all PA's distrust of PSYOPS, they are on occasion happy to use PSYOPS' methods to defend their interests.

Given the US leadership role within NATO, the memo was something of a bombshell, provoking immediate and widespread questions about what it meant for us. NATO's movement and momentum on StratCom were considerable but the foundations were not yet hardened and so progress was not irreversible. Unsurprisingly, StratCom sceptics seized upon it. Some senior and influential communicators indicated it raised serious questions about NATO's direction of travel, suggesting that we could not afford to diverge very far from the US, so might need to think about rowing back.

I and others reacted quickly to head off any momentum being built towards a new narrative of changing the direction of travel for NATO StratCom. The day after it came out, I sent out an email to the communication community saying, 'We should not understate the impact this will have on perceptions, and so we must be prepared to argue our case vigorously and cogently.'

I acknowledged that in the US, '…the whole StratCom issue did become bound up in turf fights and rice bowls' but that, 'I do not see this as a criticism per se of StratCom as a concept, process or discipline but as a defeat of a section of US defence communicators in a bureaucratic dogfight.'

Analysing the memo's direction, I argued, 'What DoD has done, apart from coining a distinctly unmemorable new phrase, is go back to the old

ways, which begs the question of why they adopted StratCom in the first place—the reason being of course because of the failings of the old ways. Back to the future indeed.'

I then concluded, 'In SHAPE we are seeing the approaches outlined in the StratCom Directive embraced more and more, while multinational corps reorganise themselves to bring the info disciplines together more effectively and to integrate information into every aspect of policy, planning and execution. Sure, it's very much a work in progress but the direction is clear.'

Little's memo also created a wider debate, notably a widely shared article from a well-respected pundit, Rosa Brooks, who had spent 27 months working on StratCom while in the Pentagon. In *Foreign Policy* in December 2012, in comprehensively rubbishing the memo she also described what StratCom was or could be, 'This understanding of strategic communication—which is reflected in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and other key DOD documents—has very little to do with traditional press and public affairs activities. In this view, "strategic communication" refers to the thoughtful integration of issues of stakeholder perception and response into policymaking, planning, and operations at every level.'

She continued, 'What strategic communication boils down to, in some ways, is a simple plea: learn, engage and listen; try to understand how people outside the United States view U.S. actors; think in advance about how what we do and say will be perceived, and plan activities accordingly.'

'Little's memo could have been written in 2002 or 2006. It hearkens back to the days when DOD leadership imagined that disciplined use of the right "messaging" would "win the war of ideas," and ignores a decade of accumulated wisdom.'

Quite. In the end, Little's memo went nowhere outside the US, where the term communication synchronization still lingers and continues to cause friction in integrating the US with NATO StratCom. Otherwise, it is a footnote, in part because StratCom had enough traction and, just

as importantly, enough Machiavellian-style 'partisans' to robustly fight its corner. But that should not disguise the potential problem it could have been. Such a memo just a couple of years earlier most likely would have had a far greater effect.

It should not be thought these internal struggles stopped the primary effort to support NATO's external challenges. To be blunt, it was frustrating to have to spend so much time on such internal fights, but we were always aware the best way to build support was to show the contribution we made and focus on being part of the overall effort.

Nevertheless, it would be fair to say in terms of moving StratCom forward we were to a large degree marking time. Afghanistan had provided an initial impetus but that had not translated into the same sense of urgency for change at the highest strategic level.

Afghanistan itself was now, in StratCom terms, also marking time. As noted, the McChrystal plan and surge had benefitted the StratCom effort—it was something of a highwater mark where strategy and communication aligned. A Communications Directorate (COMDIR) with increased resources had been created, and a career communicator with a Major General's rank was put in charge. He was followed by another two career communicators, this time at Brigadier General level, one step down, but still of general officer rank. After that it changed and not for the better, as noted below.

The COMDIR highlighted a level of commitment, but its application was erratic. The problem of inconsistent, frequently changing structures (the COMDIR structure was changed three times in one year) was amplified by variously trained, ever-rotating staff, often with little knowledge of the complex Afghan information landscape.

The irony was that the McChrystal review had produced something close to an optimal structure if only people had worked with it rather than continuously fiddling while Afghanistan smouldered. Another irony was that a number of the post-McChrystal ISAF commanders were StratCom enthusiasts. For instance, General John Allen flew to our

annual StratCom conference in Turkey in 2012, opening by saying, 'Let me tell you why I thought it was important enough to leave the combat zone to speak with you today…. As I say at ISAF Headquarters, I view StratCom as my most responsive maneuver element.'

He was entirely sincere and active in trying to make it happen, but the intent could not be matched due to the inadequacies highlighted above. I met him some years later and his frustration was still evident. This was perhaps exemplified by the fact that ultimately the COMDIR was led by brigadier generals who were neither specialised nor even experienced in communications, and mostly had no training either. They all tried their best but, in the literal not pejorative sense of the word, were amateurs.

One incumbent on departing told me he thought he had done well but was, 'Glad to see the back of the job.' Earlier, before McChrystal, another brigadier without experience had been given the communications job and phoned me, asking, 'What the f*** do I do now?'

Outside ISAF and the internationals there was also the problem of the Afghan government's communication effort. NATO/ISAF always knew the best people to speak to Afghans were other Afghans. So, there was no lack of effort and resources, but the outcomes never matched the inputs.

The problems were familiar. Cronyism and corruption meant those Afghans who were capable and committed never got the back-up they needed, with lots of internal turf fights. The Afghan government never produced an on-the-ground operation to match the Taliban in the field, including using the traditional and cultural approaches that were still valid even in the age of smart phones.

Additionally, lots of the contractor-supplied StratCom, which much increased after the surge, was not fit for purpose—at its worst it was little more than off-the-shelf variants of StratCom more suited to Western businesses. The support from ISAF and its successor operation, Resolute Support, was inhibited by our own resource and expertise problems. We were also meant to steadily hand-off the main effort to the Afghans,

which was theoretically right but often left a vacuum the Taliban were happy to fill.

Externally, the winding down of NATO's combat operations took Afghanistan off many people's radars, even if those following it on a daily basis worried at the slowness of progress.

THE UKRAINIAN KICK-START

Then came Crimea.

This is no place for a comprehensive analysis of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, but it quickly became apparent that the communication aspects of their action, first in Crimea in February 2014, and then in Eastern Ukraine, were profound, even pivotal to the success of the Russian actions. This was what is generally labelled 'hybrid conflict' in action. To use a Russian term for it, 'Information Confrontation' was totally integral to the effectiveness of their campaign.

This included disinformation and misinformation to mislead and deceive NATO and Ukraine about what was going on, false narratives to justify their actions, and creating an information bubble to isolate the Crimean population. All of this was to buy time to complete their operation, to delay any international or Ukrainian response, and to reduce resistance or win support among the population. It is also clear the Russian forces deployed in Crimea were in their actions very well aware of the information aspects of the operation.

By the time NATO had worked out what was going on in Crimea and, more importantly that it was a Russian state-led aggression, it was too late. In the aftermath, as the Russians moved onto Eastern Ukraine, there began an intense information conflict. The StratCom performance of NATO and its allies steadily improved, but we were playing catch-up.

One aspect that cannot be ignored is what I see as the Kremlin's shrewd understanding of the psychology of many NATO nation leaders. In particular, exploiting their instinctive desire to downplay the Russian state involvement. This was the time of the so-called US 'reset' to improve

relations with Russia, which ironically had deteriorated following Russia's conflict with another of its neighbours, Georgia. This attempted warming was strongly welcomed by many NATO nations who had orientated their policy to assuming Russia could be coaxed into behaving rather better. Acknowledging the total involvement of the Kremlin in the Crimean aggression would force NATO nations to consider a robust response rather than a re-set and that was an uncomfortable prospect for many. No-one, neither individuals nor nations, likes to admit to being wrong, especially so badly.

The consequence was that some demanded a level of evidence that was both unrealistic and also in reality a form of displacement activity. If they could say Kremlin involvement was not proved, then they would not have to come up with a response. It meant Russian denials were given a weight they did not deserve. The Kremlin clearly knew this and simply played for time by seeking to maintain that fog of uncertainty amongst an audience, some of whom were willing to be uncertain.

It was quite a wake-up call about all aspects of hybrid conflict, including StratCom. By the time of the NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014 the fog had cleared, and Heads of State and Government declared, 'We will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats.... This will also include enhancing Strategic Communications.'[3]

One early StratCom consequence was the accreditation of the StratCom Centre of Excellence in September 2014. It would have happened eventually anyway, but the Russian aggression accelerated it and boosted support for it. In August 2015 I gave a short speech at the inauguration of the StratCom Centre of Excellence headquarters in Riga, and highlighted the challenge, 'It is too easy to just see their lies and distortions and say we can't and shouldn't match that—and that is true. However, we should also note their professionalism, the resources they apply, their understanding and use of historical narratives, the way they

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3 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm Article 13

so thoroughly integrate information effects into their overall campaign. They lie, but they lie to achieve an effect.'

'To repeat, we can't and shouldn't match the lies—we're so much better than that—but we can match the professionalism. We have a better story, but we can also tell it better to help achieve our goals. And this is vital, as a fundamental part of protecting our societies, our values and the post-Cold War order that allowed individual nations, whether big or small, to make their own choices. The era of accepting big nations can impose spheres of interest in Europe simply because they are big is over—we need to keep it that way.'

The Russian aggression effectively broke the logjam on StratCom evolution. The right StratCom answer to the Russians and other hybrid actors was still to be agreed but the one thing it could not be, was the status quo, which was clearly not fit for purpose.

In the wake of Crimea, the initial improvised activities were then followed up by a wide variety of reviews that were launched covering all aspects of NATO. These were not just about including StratCom but all the same gave it more salience, and overall the reviews helped open the whole system to change.

At NATO HQ, the overarching approach drew on its 2015 Strategy on NATO's Role in Countering Hybrid Warfare, in which the North Atlantic Council (NAC) directed the HQ to sharpen its StratCom effort and revise it in the light of hybrid warfare. This very much placed StratCom front and centre in the context of integrating with and supporting policies rather than being an add-on, which was still the instinctive default position of many in the wider policy world.

More directly for the military, in April 2015, NATO's Military Committee (MC), the senior military policy-making body, speaking as the agreed voice of its member nations, issued NATO Military Committee Policy on Strategic Communications—Tasking to Strategic Commands.

It is a sidelight on the nature of institutional change and process that taskings to do something can often be critical to what is done, and so it was here. MC Policies, shortened to MCs, are the senior documents when it comes to military policy within NATO, reflecting an agreed position of all the nations. They are then signed off by the North Atlantic Council, NATO's senior decision-making body. Put simply, an MC policy is an order from the nations to NATO's military.

Within NATO's military there were already MCs on Public Affairs, Information Operations, and Psychological Operations—three sets of orders to three different communication disciplines. Those MCs, nominally equal, each with their own approaches, were already being used by opponents and sceptics to push back against StratCom, predicated as it was on a unifying approach. Any StratCom MC had to be able to force change in the other communication disciplines or it was dead in the water.

So, in the lengthy negotiations for the tasking, much of the debate danced around how we would deal with pre-existing MCs. Ultimately, the critical paragraph, 5c, stated, 'Consider the evolving information environment and a range of threats including hybrid activity. In so doing seek to clarify the relationships among all communication functions and as far as possible reconcile the ambiguities that are still present in existing policies, **recognising this may lead to further revision of other information-related MCs.'** (my highlighting)

Those last mild-sounding eleven words were fundamental in all that followed, opening the way for root and branch change. Every time a StratCom sceptic tried to use existing policy against us, we just quoted that. Now we were into the realm of debating what was actually needed and not being stopped purely by yesterday's policies in bureaucratic manoeuvring.

The MC tasking including paragraph 5c enabled the forging of a cohesive central communication authority, to ready us better for the fight against those external forces wielding their co-ordinated weapons of misinformation and disinformation.

But of course, it was still the start not the end. The tasking required a first draft by June 2015, to be submitted to the MC by mid-September. That was a challenging timeline to put it mildly, but that first draft was submitted to the MC on October 6, which in NATO terms is light speed. However, the policy was only finally approved by the MC on 28 June 2017 (and endorsed by the NAC on 19 July 2017). The length of time between tasking and approval indicates the intensity of debate in the interim.

That first draft was pulled together by a very small number of people and what is perhaps more surprising is that how small a proportion of the document led to that two-year delay, and equally how much was agreed virtually from the start.

For instance, the StratCom definition, which was in many respects quite radical, only had minor clarifying changes from the initial draft and did not change from the second draft of December 2015. The same applied to the StratCom principles, which set the direction for future NATO StratCom. To take one example, only a few years before saying activity is driven by narrative would have raised eyebrows among a military community more focussed on concrete activity. The fact it did not showed how far the StratCom mindset had already seeped into thinking.

However, the next two years were largely taken up with a familiar argument over authorities, mostly Public Affairs with more of a cameo role for PSYOPS and InfoOps.

This debate was at one level very narrow, arguing over a few paragraphs relating to structures, and at another fundamental. This was because at its heart StratCom is about producing synergy between all the communication disciplines and then ensuring their integration with other divisions and a prominent role within the overall effort.

That first draft stated, 'Efficiency and unity of effort dictate that the communications functions and capabilities should be structurally grouped together.' Essentially that proposal for including Public Affairs, PSYOPS, and InfoOps within a StratCom grouping never changed, along with the Communications Director reporting direct to the Command Group.

Critically, the core Public Affairs concern, direct links to the Commander at whatever level, was also protected right from the start with the Chief Public Affairs Officer (CPAO), '…retaining direct access to the commander on PA matters.' So, the CPAO was both part of the structure but also with special access to the leadership. Even so this, the issue of PA separation, bedevilled the next few years but could not be conceded when the essential nature of StratCom was pulling people together not letting them go their own way.

Painful experience had shown the existing way of doing business was not delivering what was needed in the modern information age. This was not least because the communication effort was diffused among sometimes fractious elements with different command chains, and those separations meant each of those elements tended to be small, junior, and with limited influence.

How could this change if we did not change radically and just tinkered around the edges with the same old, same old? Arguing things were basically OK was simply untenable. Without doubting the sincerity of their views, this was the question the opposition never answered.

As noted, the communications community, even within the world's largest military alliance, was small, so the debate could easily get personal. The conservatives wanted to protect their turf and saw StratCom as dangerously undermining what they valued, while the StratCom advocates regarded them as something like the cavalry in 1914, not facing up to the need to adapt to the new way of information warfare wielded by dangerous adversaries.

The mix of personality, principle, and protecting turf made for a sometimes-combustible mix. Interestingly this was conducted at a relatively junior level, mostly major or lieutenant colonel. It is a feature of StratCom, that for all the considerable attention given to it by senior levels the small numbers of actual communicators meant there were very few senior officers in communication posts. That meant communicator access to the top levels of the defence ministries was patchy.

The poor overall training within NATO also meant some of those doing the job were by no means experts, yet they were then writing the advice to their senior commanders, including to sign off as a national position presented at critical working groups. At its most extreme a nation's policy and position could effectively be that of a junior and inexperienced officer who happened to hold the relevant communication post. Working groups negotiating the policy therefore had a huge variety of expertise but inevitably gave increased weight to those few nations—not always the largest—who had genuine subject matter experts (or people who thought they were) present at the meeting.

MC0628 went through five major drafts, punctuated by some staff level re-drafting interim meetings and more critically two MC-level Working Groups with national representatives working their way through the drafts.

Over the same period dating from Russia's aggression in Ukraine there were various other developments running in parallel, notably a NAC-mandated External Review of NATO Communications and the creation of the Communication Division at SHAPE. All of them were related to and interacted with MC0628.

The external review conducted by a NATO HQ-hired contractor in the last quarter of 2015 and the first quarter of 2016 was primarily NATO HQ focussed but took in military StratCom as part of the study. Its conclusions were supportive of a new approach to communications, but its development also revealed many of the tensions.

The original working draft was not only strongly supportive of the SHAPE StratCom approach but also critical of some other elements of the existing NATO communications approach. This was not welcomed. The original military interview list had been carefully balanced between StratCom, PA, PSYOPS & InfoOps. Abruptly, some Public Affairs military StratCom sceptics were added and interviewed. Another draft came out that was much more critical of StratCom, introducing some inaccuracies. This in turn led to some formal protests from not only SHAPE StratCom but some at NATO HQ. Another, this time final,

draft took out or amended some parts and this is what went to the NAC.

It was still a useful report, but more muted than it might have been. Critically for military StratCom, while noting tensions between SHAPE StratCom and SHAPE Public Affairs, it stated, 'We also support measures to better coordinate all ACO communications functions within a directorate style structure guided by Strategic Communications concepts.'

It also highlighted known deficiencies such as in training, social media, and information environment assessment, which was welcome. Overall, at a time when the StratCom approach was under attack by some it was a bullet dodged from those who hoped to use it to undermine MC0628 development, and in key areas was a welcome validation.

This included comments on a parallel line of effort, the creation of a SHAPE Communications Division where the report stated, 'There is a consultative process to align and integrate military communications at SHAPE. This process is quite far down the line, and we know it has some internal opposition, we believe that the principle of an aligned and collaborative approach at SHAPE is right.'

In essence SHAPE, using the same thinking as it had with ACO 95-2 had decided it did not want to wait for the eventual approval of MC0628, which would apply throughout NATO's military, at some unknown date in the future. Instead, it would use SACEUR's existing authority to create a local solution within SHAPE. The view was that the need, with Russia's information confrontation, was immediate—we could not wait.

This approach reflected wider changes underway within SHAPE's overall structure which was being reviewed internally and significantly changed to align with the new world of hybrid conflict and as demanded by the NATO summit of September 2014.

As part of the response to Crimea, StratCom, represented by SHAPE's Chief StratCom had already put in for an uplift in numbers in all its NATO military headquarters, although there was also a complex debate

about cutting back on the number of PSYOPs staff at the two Joint Force Commands in Brunssum and Naples. Overall though Russia's Information Confrontation was recognised as requiring a reformed and enhanced StratCom effort at both civilian and military levels.

At SHAPE the small StratCom section under the Chief StratCom provided advice and guidance but not direction to PA, PSYOPS and InfoOps. The proposal now was to create a more powerful Communication Division combining them under the authority of a Communications Director.

Such a division would have four branches: Public Affairs; Plans, Training and Education; Information Fusion; Engagement. This was very much in line with the evolving MC policy. In formal terms the proposal was well-supported. The SHAPE Command Group, including the SACEUR (then General Phil Breedlove) was in principle supportive and externally the NATO Defence Management Audit Authority (NDMAA) backed the change. The NDMAA backing was vital because they were an independent body that effectively acted on behalf of the nations in approving manpower. A 'no' from them would have been close to a deal breaker, while their approval effectively tied any increase in staffing to the reform, which was a huge boost.

But this did not get us over the line. Behind the scenes something close to a guerrilla war was waged by Public Affairs against the change. This centred on individuals using connections with one leading NATO nation to seek to delay and then stop a final decision by the SACEUR signing off on the change. It also involved secretly bypassing the chain of command to effectively campaign against the wishes of the SHAPE command group. Ultimately this failed, and General Breedlove ordered the change just before leaving office, but it was a close-run thing.

Meanwhile, the wider effort to create the MC Military StratCom Policy went on, and again it was largely the US Public Affairs community that was the main obstacle. Although many nations sought changes and suggested improvements, most of those went with the main direction of travel.

Another staff level writing team assessed the nations' comments and produced a second draft for an MC Working Group with the nations. There had been few seriously critical comments from nations and, with the protections written into PA in particular, we went into it with some cautious optimism.

Instead, one leading nation challenged the concept of a grouping, initially over PA, and then produced a stunned silence in the meeting by saying PSYOPS and InfoOps should not be part of a group. It all got quite fractious. The working group ended with the chairperson calling another meeting in two months' time, but the mood was grim.

Effectively, while most nations liked the current draft, what was being proposed by one was a StratCom structure which did not include PA, PSYOPS, or InfoOps! It was a low point, and also something of an attempted row back. Given that all nations had already signed up to various documents implicitly supporting major changes, this would effectively take us backwards.

Regardless, a third draft was prepared leading up to the Emergency MC Working Group. A key issue was to constantly remind concerned nations, especially the main objector, that while a NATO military StratCom policy would apply to NATO bodies, headquarters, and NATO-led operations, it did not require nations to apply to their own national militaries or independent operations.

This limitation on the reach of NATO policies applied to every MC policy and always had, so it was something of a surprise this had to be said so often. Of course, for many if not most nations, a NATO policy would be at the least very influential, if not simply adopted whole, but the bigger nations tended to mix and match for their own activities.

So, the second MCWG convened in June 2016 with some trepidation. The NATO intent was to demonstrate that the draft policy answered all the key objections: Firstly, that the policy was not being pushed by some minority group but was what was wanted by NATO's senior military; secondly, that Public Affairs equities were protected; thirdly, that the

need for it had been demonstrated; fourthly, that the great bulk of NATO nations wanted it; and fifthly, it did not force nations to change their national processes.

It was a tough meeting, but the representative of the objector nation ultimately not only accepted that it was on its own in its objections, but that its own national equities were still protected. An agreement was reached at the table for representatives to take back to their nations. The mood this time was buoyant.

It did not last. The national representative was heavily criticised by his peer group on his return and the agreement at the table rescinded. This writer saw some of the objecting nation's internal documents surrounding the issue, one of which claimed their representative had been unfairly bullied into agreement. Such absurdities indicate the heat StratCom could generate.

What followed cost another year before there was agreement, which meant another year of distraction and internal debate rather than concentrating, with a structure fit for purpose, on facing our very active external adversaries.

Over the whole period of its drafting, the 'guerrilla campaign' against MC0628 by a few elements of PA was continuing. Most visibly there was the leak of a draft of MC0628 to the Reuters news agency in Brussels, complete with briefing to the journalist that the policy could lead to journalists being manipulated because of PA being put alongside PSYOPS.

This was not the first time we had seen such a tactic—within NATO it had previously happened over proposed changes to ISAF communications. In protecting themselves against the supposed threat of PSYOPS then, as noted before, a few elements of PA were happy to use its supposed tools. I should add that of course most PA staff engaged in the debate fairly, but those who played games had an impact out of proportion to their numbers.

The usual follow-up to such activity was for other anti-StratCom elements to then weigh in saying that we had better reconsider changes in order to retain vital media credibility. So having stirred up the media with leaks and a misleading briefing they argued this meant we needed to calm them down by amending or withdrawing the document they had leaked.

On this occasion it did not work. This was in part due to some aggressive counter-briefing and some blunt internal discussion about the kind of underhand tactic we were getting wise to. However, it was also due to the head of steam StratCom had already built-up, making it hard to kill our momentum.

Internally there was more manoeuvring by elements of PA to try to get SACEUR to withdraw backing for MC0628. A key part of getting the policy through was the formal approval of the various drafts by the heads of SHAPE and also the other main NATO military command, Allied Command Transformation. Such disruptive efforts included inaccurate information about the position of various nations and the draft policy's relation to other NATO communication policies. It was all very unpleasant.

That top-level support was fundamental, not just in principle, but at critical moments to get active engagement to break the logjam. This could be a problem. Four-star (the highest level) generals mostly prefer their staffs to do the grunt work, then come up with options and a recommended solution. Intervening in feuding between colonels was not usual practice, and yet that was what was needed. It was very frustrating to know you had the support of the high command but to see the process drift as those against MC0628 took advantage of the lack of a firm order.

In the end, it was just such an intervention that finally broke the deadlock Late in the process, Germany entered the fray. Germany has always been quite conservative on PA matters, and also the most sensitive about any links to PSYOPS. However, it had been relatively quiet and generally

supportive when quite suddenly, it raised objections to the grouping concept and too much closeness between PA and PSYOPS.

It looked like very bad news for MC0628 as the nation that had been an outlier now seemed to have influential company. In fact, it proved a breakthrough. SHAPE's German Chief of Staff, General Werner Freers, intervened and directed the German national staff to find a compromise solution with SHAPE StratCom. Very constructive informal exchanges then took place and additional text was added to further reinforce PA equities and meet concerns about PSYOPS. Germany withdrew its block.

That was key because if the Germans, given their stance on PA, were OK with it then it was hard for other nations to continue blocking it. Informally, we heard that the outlier nation's senior leadership decided that they did not want to be isolated on the issue when they anyway still had the freedom to act independently on national operations.

So, finally it was done. That final document, approved by the MC on 28 June 2017 and endorsed by the NAC on 19 July 2017, was in fact little different to the first draft delivered to the International Military Staff on 4 August 2015 and all the of the key proposals and principles were essentially unchanged.

For the writer that nearly two-year delay remains a source of frustration. On one level it was the necessary and therefore acceptable price to get done what needed to be done. The negotiation process had also had the collateral benefit of creating better understanding and stronger support among many nations. On the other hand, the time taken on the internal fight had inevitably taken time that would otherwise have been spent on NATO's external adversaries, all at a time when the information conflict was key.

It is still worth emphasising though that as we battled for MC0628 this external work did continue and at scale. As a snapshot, SHAPE StratCom generated an annual report to the Command Group in 2015. Aside from work towards MC0628 it showed intensive activities: support exercises; provision of training; participation in all the HQ-wide work

to counter Russia's aggression in Ukraine; preparing StratCom guidance, mostly Frameworks, on a variety of topics; supporting subordinate headquarters; all the while working closely with NATO HQ on all their outputs.

In 2014, a strong ally was also born with the launch of the StratCom Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Riga and SHAPE StratCom played an active role in its birth. The CoE will lay a strong conceptual base, provide valuable research, and overall be a springboard for future StratCom, but although it got off to a fast start, it was still in its early stages during the 0628 debate.

Nevertheless, the battle for MC0628 took far too long and, without a policy to guide activity, those activities were not as efficiently conducted as they could and should have been. Regardless, the policy now had to be implemented, and there is a long road still to travel. Much of that is the hard slog of the undramatic daily grind. It is a good point to sum up the challenges on that road.

AFGHAN DEFEAT

In so doing the NATO defeat in Afghanistan cannot be ignored. If it highlighted the problem and pointed the way to an answer, it was not enough to save the mission. So, what responsibility does the communication effort have in the West's defeat and what does it say about StratCom?

The hard truth is that our communication failure was a significant part of the overall failure—I hesitate to call it a StratCom failure because I would argue StratCom was only erratically applied. This is especially sad given several ISAF/RS commanders grasped its importance. I have already quoted General John Allen, and General Stan McChrystal was even more aware of the cognitive element, saying at a lecture in London in 2009, 'Winning the battle of perception is key…. We win when the people decide we win.' That thread ran through his assessment to the nations, linking actions and words in what he called a "deeds-based" information environment where perceptions derive from actions…'

So, if generals like them, and others, got it, why did the information Line of Effort fail along with everything else? I think it was a combination of too little, too late in all respects; our thinking, policy, resources, training, understanding narrative and Information Environment Assessment. We understood the Taliban in the broad sense but not in the granular sense needed to engage in competing in the information space. McChrystal in his assessment noted on the broader front that, 'Almost every aspect of our collective effort and associated resourcing has lagged a growing insurgency—historically a recipe for failure in COIN. Success will require a discrete "jump" to gain the initiative.'

This also applied to our StratCom effort. We started late and while we grew, the adversary grew with us, and we never jumped past them. At certain points, around the McChrystal/Petraeus period we accelerated, but we never sustained the growth, sometimes worsening the problem by chopping and changing our approach.

For all our efforts, the Afghan government effort to their own audience, aside from some effective individuals, was never good enough—a critical weakness. In fact, the international audience was never such a weakness. From quite early on NATO audiences were unenthusiastic but never to the point of active opposition, effectively giving their governments a de facto go-ahead—there were no protest marches as with Iraq. The lack of positive support constrained the willingness of some nations to be robust, or acknowledge we were in a counter-insurgency rather than peacekeeping, but it did not force nations to withdraw. The withdrawal was a policy choice—there were few votes in being either in or out of Afghanistan.

Some weaknesses StratCom could do nothing about. Afghan government corruption was one—there was awareness at all levels of its undermining effect but solving it was something else. Another weakness was the core Taliban message that they could wait us out—one day we would go, and they would still be there. The Obama time limit on the surge was a further proof of this. History has taught Afghans to hedge their bets. As the rather cynical communicators' saying puts it—you can paint lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig.

Now as we face strategic level adversaries such as Russia and China, we have still been playing catch-up and again, as we have undoubtedly grown, the problem has kept growing with us. That is why the friction in getting even basic approaches and policies agreed has cost us—you cannot recover time that has already passed.

The Afghan agenda, the issues it highlighted, still form the basis for much of today's StratCom agenda even if we have moved forward and face different adversaries in even more complex environments. I believe that is because counter-insurgency is, of all forms of warfare, the most closely related to today's so-called hybrid conflict, focussing as it does on the cognitive aspects of influence, the contest over narrative, the limits on military action as just one Line of Effort among others, the often hidden nature of the adversary and the long-term nature of the struggle with its somewhat blurry definitions of what success looks like. As I suggested earlier, in this sense 'hybrid' perhaps misleads us into thinking we are facing something entirely new when its principles are an evolution, albeit radical, of older forms of conflict better described as political warfare.

That is why this first history of NATO StratCom will, for now, end here with the passing of MC0628. For I see its passage as the winning of the war of ideas. It is always unwise to be too certain of anything, but it is nevertheless hard to see NATO going back when all around us is the evidence that the old ways did not and will not work. So MC0628 does, for me, mark a fundamental inflection point, its principles and those supporting it hugely influencing everything that follows.

That does not mean the struggle is over, far from it, as the idea, reflected as it is in the policy, is nothing without the implementation.

That phase of practical implementation will most often be slow and grinding, requiring commitment, persistence, patience, and also resources. The signs are this is happening, albeit slower than necessary given the problem is very much here and now.

All the same, on Information Environment Assessment, NATO is moving forward on a sophisticated and well-considered system that promises much. On restructuring of NATO's military, the direction of MC0628 is gathering pace, albeit in the face of a few holdouts.

Beyond that the wider integration of StratCom principles and practices across NATO's military, as outlined by MC0628, is now being followed up by the promise of significant progress on forward-looking doctrines. These are AJP (Allied Joint Publication)-01, the highest-level NATO military doctrine for all NATO operations, and AJP-10, the first doctrine on StratCom.

As I write this, drafts are being circulated that, if approved, would mark a major step forward for the implementation of StratCom within NATO and also its national militaries. Although such staff work may seem undramatic, doctrine is the codification of experience and as such is part of the hard yards of effort needed to create sustained change within and across the military.

Of more immediate effect, a thoroughly updated SHAPE directive on StratCom (ACO 95-2) has also been approved, which—because it comes into effect immediately—should direct and enable implementation within NATO's military structures.

Many of the responses triggered by Russia's aggression in Ukraine have also seen Strategic Communicators increasingly both integrated and more influential in developing key areas such as deterrence. NATO's military have also approved a comprehensive set of standards for the future training and education of communicators, and also of senior leadership who need to use StratCom as part of their overall effort. This itself followed SHAPE StratCom being made the Requirements Authority (RA) to set standards and numbers for training and education, and more recently the StratCom COE being made responsible for ensuring the delivery of that training.

So, there is a lot happening. However, the issue of training, education, and numbers is also emblematic of the continuing issues and a contributor to them. Put simply, there are not enough communicators, and they are not trained well enough and not of sufficient rank to count enough at the top table. This applies both in terms of specific practitioners and the wider community who need to know how to integrate StratCom as part of the mission. There is a clear disconnect between the stated importance attached to StratCom and the reality of putting resources in place and sustained attention to make it happen.

This also includes the top commanders personally and actively engaging to push the StratCom project on. Too often there was genuine but also passive support which enabled often quite junior staff to play the spoiler and slow things down. At critical points a logjam was finally broken only when a four-star general personally intervened to push through a policy they had already supported but was being blocked lower down. In complex institutions there are always plenty of mice willing to play if they think the cat is away or looking elsewhere. This is especially so with a new way of doing business when Machiavelli's saying about the difficulty of change holds so true.

As I write this some military entities are still resisting the reforms required by MC0628 which is, let us remember, an order not an option from NATO's and NATO nations' senior command. They get away with it because, as noted earlier, commanders sometimes fight shy of gripping their subordinates. What success I have had has been for a number of reasons such as a certain clarity of aim and determination, as well as longevity in post, but it has always been as part of a wider like-minded team. In particular, I am eternally grateful to those generals who had my back at some tricky times and intervened at the critical moment.

The issue of specialism, training, and education remains a key weakness. It is pretty much standard for the senior posts in StratCom (brigadier generals notably, but often lower as well) to be held by non-communicators, often with no or very limited training. It is often a touchy point, as the holders of those posts take umbrage at any suggestion they

are not up to the task. In terms of basic competence and motivation that is usually true, but in no other part of the military would it be considered routine for someone with minimal if any experience and minimal if any training to lead such a key area.

As I once asked a NATO Military Committee, would they allow me, as a career communicator to lead an armoured brigade? Of course, they laughed, and I then asked, why would they then allow the reverse? To a lesser but significant degree, the same applies in the civilian area.

At heart, I suspect there is an assumption that StratCom is somehow easier. It is not, and in today's hybrid environment where StratCom is a main Line of Effort—and unless the shooting starts, perhaps THE main Line of Effort—we will pay heavily for that mistake.

Indeed, StratCom is getting harder. Social media, the dark web, universal access to the internet, the speed of information flow, the complexity of data management—keeping up with the new information age will tax anyone. Even the professionals are running hard to stand still in an era of dizzying change.

As with other parts of the military profession, and in its own way the civilian sector, there needs to be career progression that attracts those who seek high office and ensures StratCom in person and as a topic has a routine place at the top table. Bluntly, knowing your StratCom needs to be seen as career-enhancing.

This also means NATO's nations must seize the challenge of StratCom, and there are some encouraging signs. The Baltic nations, especially Lithuania, were early adopters, as has been non-NATO Sweden. Belgium has restructured itself, the Netherlands has created an Information Manoeuvre Arm including a Communication and Engagement Corp. Britain has its 6th Division, including 77 Brigade that, 'prepares and generates the Army's Information Manoeuvre and Unconventional Warfare forces for both constant competition and warfighting, as well as routinely conducting operations below the threshold of armed conflict in the virtual and physical dimensions.'

Over in the US, the picture is still mixed but its army in particular is developing the concept of 'Information Advantage'. This covers both the technical and influence areas with five elements: Enabling decision-making; protecting friendly information; informing and educating domestic audiences; informing and influencing international audiences; and conducting information warfare. Although the debate is still very much alive, this is just one of a number of interesting developments within the US where Information Advantage is recognised as a commander's direct business, with information accepted alongside airpower and so on as a key element of combat power.

Of course, this also has to be translated onto the political level—we understandably fight shy of terms like political warfare, but our adversaries do not. Russian Information Confrontation, China's Three Warfares, and United Front activities are a part of our everyday reality. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted the change in 2018, 'What we see is of course that Russia is in a way...launching or is responsible for **aggressive actions below Article 5**, as we call it, **below what triggers a full-fledged response** from the alliance [my emphasis].' And if this is the zone we are working in, then information, StratCom, must be a critical element, albeit one to be used in an ethical way that reflects our values, not those of our adversaries.

I feel privileged to have worked for NATO and to have had the opportunity to make a difference, to be deeply involved in a critical part of our response to what I consider existential challenges. My time within NATO is over, but I leave behind some superb colleagues with absolute commitment and huge ability. What they need is institutional support.

This is no dialogue of despair, NATO and NATO's militaries have moved a long way, and we are in a far better place than we were, but the goalposts have also moved. There is much to do and no time to waste. The foundations have been laid, the path is clear, and the need for action is now.