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HOW U.S. GOVERNMENT FELL IN AND OUT OF LOVE WITH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The development of strategic communications in the United States has taken place in conjunction with a long history of foreign interventions. Its rise in various government agencies is interwoven with these developments. This article traces the rise and fall of strategic communications in the United States government, from its emergence in the years leading up to 9/11, through debates on the definition of the

concept during conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, ending in its current stasis. Any chronology of strategic communications in the United States government leaves us with more questions than answers.

INTRODUCTION

Between the first use of the term 'strategic communications' by the United States government in the early 2000s and the withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, a number of reports, plans, manuals, and directives have been produced by various government agencies on the subject. Each had its own mission and understanding of strategic communications.[1] After two decades of debate, little consensus has been reached.

This article sets out to review the United States government approach to, and understanding of, strategic communications. It traces the origins and use of the term by different agencies—its twists and turns in relation to political turbulence in the United States and abroad—from the late 1990s until the last United States troops boarded a plane at Kabul airport in August 2021.

Today strategic communications is broadly understood as the aligning of words, images, actions, and policy by a political actor with the intent of achieving changes in attitudes and/or behaviour of a target audience. This is consistent with the views of scholar-practitioners like James Farwell and Christopher Paul who adopt a similar instrumentalist approach.[2] Nevertheless, even when viewed as a practice, Neville Bolt identifies the need to place it in the more specific framework of state to state or state to non-state actor. Hence it addresses 'the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects, using words,

1 These publications are referenced throughout, and a broader range is captured in the bibliography of this article.
2 James Farwell, *The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012); Christopher Paul, 'Whither Strategic Communication?', *RAND Occasional Paper* (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation, 2009).

images, actions and non-actions in the national interest or the interest of a political community'.[3] By contrast, the NATO Strategic Communications Terminology Working Group takes a more essentialist perspective: Not simply, what does it do? But what is it? For the Working Group it is 'a holistic approach to communications based on values and interests that encompass everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.[4] That strategic communications competes in a contested and dynamic environment, speaks to a particular slant on how strategy is understood. Consequently, the notion that the world of communications is fiercely contested sets the context for strategic communications to 'shift and shape long-term discourses'. While considering strategy to be synonymous with manoeuvring, negotiating, and navigating the frictions of the real world, it cautions against falling victim to the setbacks of the operational or tactical world.[5] A contested term, it is nevertheless important to differentiate between communicating strategically and projecting strategic communications. Although the term was only to emerge with some currency in Washington several years after 9/11, the thinking and approach in which it is grounded had begun to develop even earlier.

Concepts and definitions in the realm of communications rarely appear in isolation; they originate in policy and practice. Strategic communications is not an academic discipline developed in libraries by academics. Since its inception it has been tied to the political context of its time and the internal structure and operations of, among others, the US government. Strategic communications has been debated, developed, and adapted within government agencies, each attempting to align it with pre-existing concepts including public affairs, information operations, psychological operations, and public diplomacy. Moreover, each agency has a vested interest with agendas tied to staff who seek employment security and competing positions of power within

3 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* Volume 6 (Spring 2019): 4-5.
4 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).
5 Neville Bolt, *Strategic Communications and Disinformation in the Early 21st Century* (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole: European University Institute, 2022).

management structures. The evolution of the field and its definitions have been shaped accordingly. The outcome raises important questions: *what* is strategic communications; *how* does it speak to existing concepts in the information sector; *who* carries out strategic communications in government; and, importantly but often forgotten, *what* are government communicators trying to communicate?

Reviewing the trajectory of documents including reports, memos, and directives on strategic communications establishes both a genealogy and a record for future scholarship. This review is divided into four sections. It begins with the emergence of strategic communications outside US Government in the years leading up to 9/11. The concept came to the foreground of international affairs in the context of a rapidly changing world order in which the behaviour of nation states across borders was coming under increasing scrutiny.

Second, it reviews the rise of strategic communications in Washington from the early 2000s when the term found traction as it reflected a shift in attitude that would enable the United States to reengage with foreign audiences whose support was waning. Strategic communications in these years was driven most prominently through American diplomatic and military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), 2002 had sought a 'continuation, and a deepening, of our longstanding commitment to work with all peoples of the Middle East to improve their daily lives and to help them face the future with hope'.[6] So declared former Secretary of State, Colin Powell. Meanwhile actions in pursuit of al-Qaeda had also led to successive policies of counter-terror which evolved into counterinsurgency, stability operations, and nation building. What has been characterised as mission creep and message creep in Afghanistan by ISAF/NATO and Coalition forces and their governments, would eventually conclude with targeted

6 Jeremy Sharp, *CRS Report for Congress*, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 2005).

counterterrorism before withdrawal from theatre.[7] Discussions around strategic communications are woven into these developments and should be read accordingly.

Third, this article extends its review of strategic communications through the lens of President Barack Obama who sought to align contradictory ideas and approaches, defining its core purpose by the maxim of 'closing the say-do gap'. Even with this clearer vision, a decade of inter- and intra-agency definitional conflict endured. Those tasked with integrating strategic communications into their agencies were often thwarted in pursuit of agreeing and implementing extensive processes of strategic communications.

The final section of this review brings the debate up to date with the aftermath of President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan while Taliban fighters were seizing the reins of power in Kabul.

Any attempt to define strategic communications in the United States is inevitably bound up with administrative turf wars in Washington and the pressures and dissonant voices emanating from fellow NATO member states during these years. Yet this account begins with the United Nations and its troubled years in the early 1990s.

REPURPOSING THE UNITED NATIONS

> The Council [UNSC] initially viewed its role as preventing a third world war. As the Cold War came to define global politics, the Council moved to tackle prevention of regional conflicts (often between client states or proxies of the superpowers) from spilling into a global conflagration.[8]

7 Brett Boudreau, *We Have Met the Enemy and He is Us* (Riga, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016); Gordon Adams, *Mission Creep: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy?* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).
8 David D. Malone, *The UN Security Council: From the Cold War to the 21st Century* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004), p. 4.

Yet there were long term consequences to this development. The success of mandating the use of force and intervention into Iraq (Operation Desert Storm in January 1991) and overcoming the defences of Saddam Hussein bred a certain optimism. Indeed, it apparently

> induced an era of euphoria in the Council, an era that could not have arisen during the Cold War. Having successfully tackled a conceptually straightforward challenge to international peace and security in the form of Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait, the Council now waded into the murkier waters of civil wars and intercommunal strife with which it had little experience.[9]

There was a humanitarian backstory here too. In the late 1960s, against the backdrop of the Vietnam war, daily broadcasts of violence and human suffering had emerged from the African continent, too. A conflict between the small, secessionist Republic of Biafra and the Nigerian government had resulted in famine, triggering an international humanitarian relief effort. Despite the restrictions of international laws governing non-intervention, humanitarian actors responded to images of malnourished children in the Biafran War by arguing there should be no borders to humanitarian relief.[10] The subsequent founding of *Médecins Sans Frontières* by French doctors who had worked in Biafra signified a shift in global discourses on foreign aid interventions. A debate over the responsibility of the international community to intervene, protect, and prevent human suffering within sovereign borders had now emerged. Such was the context that shaped the development of strategic communications in the offices of the United Nations in New York.

Two decades after Biafra and Vietnam, the United Nations faced the daunting task of implementing the responsibility to protect (R2P). Although the organisation achieved several peacekeeping successes, providing peacekeeping forces in Namibia (1989)[11], ending civil wars in

9 Ibid., p. 5.
10 Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, *L'Humanitaire en Guerre Civil: La Crise du Biafra (1967-1970)* [Humanitarians in Civil War: the Biafra crisis (1967-1970)], (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018).
11 Lise M. Howard, *UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1994), and monitoring elections in post-apartheid South Africa (1994)[12], the 1990s would nevertheless come to represent a nadir in its fortunes. It repeatedly failed to act in the face of serious crises. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda did not to intervene when a genocide unfolded before its eyes (1994); a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations Operation in Somalia was simply ignored (1995); and Dutchbat III forces within the United Nations Protection Force (1995) refused to intervene when Bosniak Muslims were massacred in the besieged town of Srebrenica, an enclave it had declared to be safely under its protection.[13] These setbacks for the UN had taken the shine off a new decade of hope that would rapidly descend into the turbulent 1990s. Moreover, it was detrimental to the organisation's credibility. The Agenda for Peace (1995) of then controversial Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, advocated a set of reforms following hard on the heels of the Rwandan debacle, and focusing on prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict peacebuilding.

However, it was left to his successor Kofi Annan to restore the authority and purpose of the United Nations.[14] Although still respected around the world, the United Nations had lost the trust of populations whose lives it was expected to safeguard.

Reforming Communications in the United Nations

According to Annan, a shift in communication was required: from a passive response to media inquiries to seizing the attention of the media agenda. Not only was it pivotal in repairing the damage inflicted by recent crises, but the story of the United Nations had to be told better. And that required strategic communications. A *Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities,* chaired by Mark Malloch

12 Douglas G. Anglin, 'International Monitoring of the Transition to Democracy in South Africa, 1992-1994', *African Affairs* Volume 94 (1995): 519-543.
13 Mats Berdal and Spyros Economides, *United Nations Interventionism, 1991-2004* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
14 Annan was appointed the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations in 1997, and would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001, recognising his efforts to revitalise the United Nations and prioritise human rights.

Brown,[15] was set up to review existing communications structures and propose a programme of reform. Alongside diplomats, Task Force members included several journalists.[16] *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations* was published in 1997.[17] The report's authors wrote:

> The UN is principally a forum for the exchange of ideas. We argue that in some senses the UN can be thought of as a global communications agency. A culture of communications must therefore pervade the entire Organization, with responsibility for public diplomacy borne by all senior officials, ambassadors and the larger UN family.[18]

A 'global forum for debate', perhaps, but Malloch Brown found the UN was failing to reassure the world that it was also the spokesman and implementer of consensus reached by its member states.[19] It had not only dealt ineffectively with crisis, primarily due to the indecisiveness of the Security Council, but most importantly was considered irrelevant by many because of its inability to address the issues about which they cared most. The report concluded:

> at a time when the UN's unique international role and agenda, and the values it articulates, coincide with the concerns of people in both industrialized and developing countries, one might expect it to have a place at the center of peoples' world view. In fact, the opposite has happened.[20]

15 At the time, Malloch Brown was Vice-President of External Affairs of the World Bank.
16 Including Peter Arnett of CNN; Ingrid A. Lehmann, *Peacekeeping and Public Information: Caught in the Crossfire* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999); M. D. Alleyne, *Global Lies? Propaganda, the UN and World Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
17 Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities, *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations* (New York: United Nations, 1997).
18 Ibid., p. 11.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

The Task Force proposed delineating the organisation's two core roles – a 'unique global forum for debate' and 'spokesman, advocate and implementer of that consensus' telling its story to the world.[21] Reform to be implemented by Annan could only succeed when reinforced by 'good communications'. This would restore the confidence of people served by the United Nations and garner global support for its mission.[22] It required reorganising communications structures inside the organisation. Those in charge of communications should be integrated into decision- and policy-making rather than serve as mere outlets for decisions to the world. Communications should thus be 'at the heart of the strategic management of the Organization', brought into the Secretary General's 'innermost policy-making circle and of other policy-coordination groups'.[23] A commitment to implementing this organisational communications strategy would strengthen its global leadership position and reverse the United Nations' diminished role in the public imagination. In his review of communications arrangements in the UN, Malloch Brown defined strategic communications as:

> The kind of communications that allows an organization to be effective in its substantive work as well as its constituency-building can be characterized as strategic communications… Strategic communications is more than the sum of its parts, which include public information, press relations, and constituency-building. Above all, it is an intimate link in policy-making. The vision of the Organization's role and priorities that drives the communications effort must proceed from the top policy-making level and pervade the Organization comprehensively.[24]

21 Ibid., p. ii.
22 Ibid., p. i.
23 Ibid., pp. ii-iii.
24 Ibid., pp. 9-10.

Kofi Annan took the advice to heart. Shortly afterwards, the planned reform, rooted in the findings of Malloch Brown's Task Force, was outlined in the publication *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform,* in which the Secretary-General disclosed:

> Here the report is seeking nothing less than to transform the leadership and management structure of the Organisation, enabling it to act with greater unity of purpose, coherence of efforts, and agility in responding to the many challenges it faces. These measures are intended to renew the confidence of Member States in the relevance and effectiveness of the Organization and Revitalize the spirit and commitment of its staff.[25]

A core element of the reform programme was a new information and communications plan to meet the changing needs of the United Nations. Although it did not explicitly mention the term strategic communications—unlike its 1997 predecessor—its main message reflected an understanding of the concept that would continue to shape the debate: what we say and what we do communicates. Rather than root its communication capacity solely in the Department of Public Information, the 'culture of communications' recommended by the Task Force had to be integrated into all Departments of the United Nations.[26] In doing so, Annan instigated a fundamental change in the United Nations' understanding of information activities.

In 2002 the UN's Department of Public Information was split. It would now have a separate 'Strategic Communications Division' responsible for coordinating and shaping the image of the United Nations.[27] The department too became aligned with the Task Force recommendations to 'embrace public diplomacy as the means of building and sustaining support for positive changes in global cooperation on the problems that concern real people'.[28] Reorganised and reoriented, the department,

25 United Nations Secretary-General, *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform* (New York: United Nations, 1997).
26 Ibid., p. 25.
27 The Department also established a 'News and Media Division' and a 'Public Outreach Division'.
28 Task Force on the Reorientation of UN Public Information Activities, *Global Vision, Local Voice,* p. 34.

according to Kofi Annan, was now equipped to promote the story of the UN.[29] The project 'Ten Stories the World Should Hear More About' was launched in 2004.[30] At a time when most media attention was being drawn to the conflict in Iraq, the project's intent was to bring stories of human struggle that otherwise received too little exposure in international media coverage. These included humanitarian emergencies in the Central African Republic, Tajikistan, and the Bakassi Peninsula between Cameroon and Nigeria.[31] Although its implementation, pursued through consultation between UN agencies and local offices, meant the organisation was becoming better coordinated, its external effect remained limited.[32] The stories were side-lined by the noise of the Iraq war and the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean.

Notwithstanding, as the new millennium arrived, the UN had committed to a number of wide-ranging and far-reaching goals that set global leaders to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental stability; and develop a global partnership for development. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals Fund still presents its case in the following terms:

> In September 2000, leaders of 189 countries gathered at the United Nations headquarters and signed the historic Millennium Declaration…the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] were revolutionary in providing a universal language to reach global agreement. The 8 goals were realistic and easy to communicate, with a clear measurement/monitoring mechanism'.[33]

29 United Nations Department of Information, *Questions Relating to Information* (New York: United Nations, 2003).
30 Other initiatives included increased cooperation with the private sector and the appointment of celebrities as 'goodwill ambassadors' to raise further awareness; United Nations News, 'UN spotlights top 10 issues that should garner more media coverage' (New York, United Nations, 2004), (accessed 22 December 2021).
31 Ibid.; later iterations of the project included Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nepal, and Cote d'Ivoire.
32 Annan later stated that the project was successful in fulfilling its expectation; United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization* (New York: United Nations, 2005).
33 Sustainable Development Goals Fund (SDGF), 'From MDGs to SDGs', (accessed 27 December 2021). See also MDG Achievement Fund website, (accessed 2 January 2022).

As time would show, revolutionary ambitions are not always realistic and even harder to achieve, however easy they might be to communicate. The outcomes would prove at best uneven. However, the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012 promoted a fresh set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to develop the earlier MDGs. By July 2014, 17 goals drafted by the UN General Assembly Open Working Group (OWG) were placed before the General Assembly. And in 2015 these were approved and set the course for the medium-term agenda of 2015-30 in which we find ourselves today.[34]

The ten-story project of 2004 exemplified changes in the UN's strategic communications and a desire to engage audiences in a more imaginative and less bureaucratic fashion. Human interest storytelling should replace more prosaic press releases. A 'culture of communications' was to some extent embraced, and the Organization began to strengthen its position as a global leader while underscoring the role of the UN in addressing human catastrophes and promoting human rights. At the 2005 World Summit, a gathering of 150 world leaders at the UN headquarters in New York claimed to have reached: 'a unified stance by the international community on a broad array of crucial issues from combating poverty and promoting development to unqualified condemnation of all forms of terrorism along with the acceptance of collective responsibility.'[35]

However, its outcomes were again criticised for being vague, of little substance, and lacking any specific, targeted action plans. Even after embracing a culture of communications, the UN continues to struggle to overcome the perception of a diminishing role in the public imagination. The question remains whether this constitutes failed strategic communications. Or do the UN's governing structures prevent its agencies from taking quick and decisive action—a tension played out under public scrutiny, particularly in extreme crises or outbreaks of conflict and war? Are the processes of the Security Council and General Assembly too ridden with partisan agendas to reach unequivocal

34 Ibid.
35 UN General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization,* p. 2.

consensus more regularly? While New York's setting big, conceptual goals and claiming the moral high ground has been welcomed in many quarters, such strategic-level goals have been thrown off course by the all too brutal tactical demands of communicating through crises.

In more recent conflicts, the UN's response to crisis on the ground has been mixed. Decisive and substantial actions have included the passing of Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) pursuant to Resolution 1970 (2011), which authorised the use of force to protect civilians in Libya. It was the first combat operation by the UN since the Gulf War in 1991.[36] Described by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as a 'historic' affirmation of the global community, the Resolution has been considered a successful implementation of the Organization's commitment to R2P.[37] Within a month, the coalition was mobilised, a mandate secured, no-drive and no-fly zones enforced, and Muammar Gaddafi's advance on Benghazi halted.[38] The UN had reinforced its commitment to be present as an actor on the ground. But at the same time, it invited criticism for failing to intervene further in the Libyan civil war, and for its reluctance to seek regime change. No such interventions of force have yet been undertaken to address human suffering in Yemen and Syria, or in response to the 2021 humanitarian emergency in Afghanistan. Continuing discussions in the Security Council have yet to produce targeted action plans.[39]

FROM COUNTERTERRORISM TO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Entering office in 2001, President George W. Bush targeted the human rights and nation-building policies of the Clinton years. Less preoccupied with the sentiments of foreign populations, he felt this lay beyond the concern of the Department of Defence. The United States military,

36 Ramesh Thakur, 'Libya and the Responsibility to Protect: Between Opportunistic Humanitarianism and Value- Free Pragmatism', *Security Challenges* Volume 7 (2011).
37 United Nations News, 'Libya: Ban welcomes Security Council authorization of measures to protect civilians', (New York: United Nations, 18 March 2011), (accessed 27 December 2021).
38 Thakur, 'Libya and the Responsibility to Protect'.
39 United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 'Abandoning Afghanistan Now, amid Humanitarian Crisis, Would Be 'Historic Mistake', Special Representative Tells Security Council' (New York: United Nations, 17 November 2021), (accessed 27 December 2021).

he had repeatedly emphasised in his election campaign and later as President, was about hardware—equipment, machines, training, and personnel on the ground. Time and money should not be wasted on nation-building. Bush had the support of the military establishment. Having been engaged in some of the failed peacekeeping missions that drove the United Nations to reconsider its position—Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti and Kosovo—the US military establishment pushed back against 'Military Operations Other Than War'.[40]

While the White House had not yet embraced a broader approach to American foreign military engagement with a more important role given to communications, the potential of strategic communications gradually appeared across government agencies. It can be identified in a report of the Defense Science Board Task Force (DSB), published by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of State.[41] Although rooted in furthering US national interests, its understanding echoes the strategic communications adopted by the United Nations under Annan:

> U.S. civilian and military information dissemination capabilities are powerful assets vital to national security. They can create diplomatic opportunities, lessen tensions that might lead to war, help contain conflicts, and address nontraditional threats to America's interests…Information – not as "spin," but as policy – is not simply a rhetorical flourish in which solutions to a crisis are presented, it is an integral part of the solution itself.[42]

40 Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), pp. 79-81.
41 Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2001). The Defense Science Board is a Federal Advisory Committee of civil experts, providing independent advice on scientific and technical matters, advising the Department of Defense.
42 Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report on Managed Information Dissemination*, p. 1.

The Task Force was the first in Washington to refer to strategic communications, albeit only once in its report, preferring to use the term 'coordinated' or 'managed information dissemination'. It defined 'sophisticated strategic communications' as a capacity that can 'set the agenda and create a context that enhances the achievement of political, economic, and military objectives. Over time, they may shape foreign perceptions in ways that support America's interests.'[43] The report continued by proposing that civilian and military information dissemination capabilities should aim to 'create diplomatic opportunities, reduce tensions leading to war, help contain conflicts, and address nontraditional threats to U.S. security.'[44] In order to achieve this, the authors found, efforts must go beyond the Department of Defense and engage with, among others, the U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. international broadcasting services.[45] Written in the spring and summer of 2001, it was published three weeks after the attacks of September 11. Its findings were largely left unused. In an address to Congress and the nation just over a week after 9/11, President Bush moved in the opposite direction when he declared the Global War on Terror (GWOT):

> …the enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country…There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries…Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated…We will direct every resource at our command – every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war – to the destruction and to the defeat of the global terror network.[46]

43 Ibid., p. 8.
44 Ibid., p. 1.
45 Ibid., p. 2.
46 'President Bush's address to a Joint Session of Congress and the Nation', *The Washington Post,* 20 September 2001, (accessed 7 December 2021).

If this was strategic communications, then it was being played out in its most coercive form. The events of 9/11 triggered a series of reviews of the failures of United States' public diplomacy. These included the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, *Building Public Diplomacy Through a Reformed Structure and Additional Resources* (2002) and *The New Diplomacy: Utilizing Innovative Communication Concepts that Recognize Resource Constraints* (2003); Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab & Muslim World* (2003); U.S. General Accountability Office to the Committee on International Relations, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Expands Efforts But Faces Significant Challenges* (2003).

In the years that followed, the United States launched military interventions into Afghanistan in search of Osama Bin Laden, and Iraq, following the questionable claim that the country was hiding weapons of mass destruction.[47] Terrorism and counterterrorism became the symbiotic framework through which national security efforts were conducted by Washington. Through this lens it assessed its friends and enemies—who was a victim, and which political actors were to blame. The harbouring of those groups, state or non-state, considered a threat to the United States was sufficient justification for foreign intervention, according to the Bush administration. Rather than engage with states (and their populations) considered a potential threat, it divided the world into allies and enemies. Allies were engaged with, enemies were not.[48] This can be seen in the 2002 National Security Strategy which stated that the 'United States will continue to work with our allies' and 'must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients'.[49] The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review had already highlighted the need to step up information operations and to integrate them into 'military operations as a complement to air, land, sea, and special operations

47 The 2002 National Security Strategy speaks of "irrefutable proof"; President Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002), p. 14
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., pp. 6, 14.

with the aim of achieving desired effects using all elements of the U.S. defense posture'.[50]

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld soon encountered the defining dilemma of strategic communications—information versus influence. This dichotomy between two perspectives on the purpose and effect of information communicated by governments to populations, accounts for the historic resistance of military public affairs to strategic communications, which they perceive as no longer transmitting 'neutral' or objective information. Instead, for military public affairs, appears to be wedded to achieving a partisan effect on the enemy or its population. Rumsfeld would fall foul of this debate when ordering the establishment of the Office of Strategic Influence. Its mission being to 'generate disinformation and propaganda that would help the United States counter Islamic extremists and pursue the war on terrorism'.[51] And its target: foreign media, particularly in the Middle East. Unfortunately, in the joined-up world of 21st century digital communications, relaying information—whether evidenced or fabricated—to a foreign population, could find its way back to a government's own citizens within minutes. To subvert the American population with anything resembling propaganda had already been rendered illegal under the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948.[52] At the same time, connecting information operations to foreign populations, including those in friendly Western Europe, had traditionally been the preserve of the State Department and its public diplomacy efforts. One former psyops officer commented that the Office 'rolled up all the instruments within D.O.D. to influence foreign audiences…the D.O.D. has traditionally not done these things'.[53]

The Department of Defense's encroachment into this already fraught moral area could only set in motion fresh turf wars inside Washington.

50 Donald H. Rumsfeld, *2001 Guidance and Terms of reference for the Quadrennial Defense Review*, United States Department of Defense, 22 June 2001, p. 13.
51 William Arkin, 'Media Mongering', *Index on Censorship* Volume 1 (2003): 26.
52 The 1948 U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act was amended in July 2013.
53 James Dao and Eric Schmitt, 'A Nation Challenged: Hearts and Minds; Pentagon Readies Efforts to Sway Sentiment Abroad', *The New York Times*, 19 February 2002, (accessed 2 January 2022).

Recording the Office's obituary in 2002, the New York Times observed: 'Little information is available about the Office of Strategic Influence, and even many senior Pentagon officials and Congressional military aides say they know almost nothing about its purpose and plans. Its multimillion dollar budget, drawn from a $10 billion emergency supplement to the Pentagon budget authorised by Congress in October, has not been disclosed'.[54] Notwithstanding, its director, a US Air Force officer, had confided its policies ranged 'from the blackest of black programmes to the whitest of white'. In short, a recipe that would spell its own demise.[55]

Several initiatives in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 reflected efforts by government agencies to engage with strategic communications. But these did not see the light of day outside the framework of GWOT.[56] In 2002, the Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee was established under the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy. And in 2006 the Department of Defense set up the Office of Joint Communication and the Strategic Communication Integration Group.

From Counterterrorism to Stabilisation Operations

Despite international expressions of sympathy and support for Washington in the early days after September 2001, enthusiasm for counterterror responses solidified. George Bush's 'with us or against us' proposition would soon begin to wear thin. In the following years, the international reputation of the United States would be further eroded by a range of events including allegations of torture in Iraq, CIA black sites, and the publication of photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners in Iraq. It was not until the full review of the 9/11 Commission Report was published in 2004 that the government recognised that pursuing its enemies across borders required a broader effort and engagement with the states whose sovereignty it breached. Notwithstanding, President

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ken S. Heller and Liza M. Persson, 'The Distinction Between Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy', in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy,* ed. by Nancy Snow and Philip M. Taylor, (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 225-233; Brooks, *How Everything Became War,* pp. 86-88.

Barack Obama would later breach the sovereignty of Pakistan when despatching Navy Seals to kill Osama Bin Laden.

The 9/11 Commission report revealed a shift in the understanding of the Bush administration as it began to engage with the idea that the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were not simply kinetic but more significantly, symbolic: 'An organization like al Qaeda, headquartered in a country on the other side of the earth, in a region so poor that electricity or telephones were scarce, could nonetheless scheme to wield weapons of unprecedented destructive power in the largest cities of the United States.'[57] Consistent with the experience of the Clinton years that Al-Qaida was recruiting among the populations of unstable states, the government could not continue to ignore this. The report found:

> Because the Muslim world has fallen behind the West politically, economically, and militarily for the past three centuries, and because few tolerant or secular Muslim democracies provide alternative models for the future, Bin Laden's message finds receptive ears…Tolerance, the rule of law, political and economic openness, the extension of greater opportunities to women – these cures must come from within Muslim societies themselves. The United States must support such developments. But this process is likely to be measured in decades, not years.[58]

The term strategic communications is not made explicit in the report. But this publication triggered a change in approach by the government to engaging global audiences.[59] A range of reviews of public perception of the United States by public and private sector organisations was published in the following years, including *Views from the Muslim World: Opposition to U.S. Foreign Policy Contrasts with Admiration for American Innovation and Education* (Department of Defense, 2003) and *Iraq One Year*

57 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), p. 362.
58 Ibid., p. 363.
59 Ibid.

Later: Global Media Assessment Largely Negative Media Assessment Largely Negative (Office of Research, Department of State, 2004). The new framework of counter-terrorism would narrow the focus to a range of political and economic factors.

The National Security Strategy, 2002 had declared 'For most of the twentieth century, the world was divided by a great struggle over ideas: destructive totalitarian visions versus freedom and equalities. That great struggle is over.'[60] Be that as it may, the strategy talked of the White House's commitment to 'Expand the Circle of Development by Opening Societies and Building the Infrastructure of Democracy' and of the need to increase development assistance while opening societies to investment and commerce. Much later in 2009, Max Boot sought to set the record straight on what had been perceived—he argued misperceived—as a conservative ascendancy in the White House. At the same time, he praised the National Security Strategy as ambitious, observing 'Bush realized the United States could no longer afford a 'humble' foreign policy'. He cited a menu of policy approaches: 'US primacy, promotion of democracy, vigorous action, pre-emptive if necessary, to stop terrorism and weapons proliferation'.[61]

Meanwhile the findings of the 9/11 Commission echoed the continuing debate on the breach of sovereignty of those nations it labelled 'remote regions and failing states.' The authors argued that: 'The United States has had to find ways to extend its reach, straining the limits of its influence'.[62] Although in this case pursued with the national interest of the United States in mind, this shift connected its efforts to previously introduced debates on interventions that should 'better' the lives of those beyond a nation's own borders. If the United States could bring democracy through healthcare, education, and economic development—while at the same time furthering its own interests by preventing conflict—it should do so. Counterterrorism would merge into a focus on stability operations and counterinsurgency

60 The White House, National Security Review (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002), (accessed 16 December 2021).
61 Max Boot, 'Think Again: Neocons', *Foreign Policy,* 28 October 2009, (accessed 17 December 2021).
62 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 367.

by 2005.[63] It is in conjunction with these developments in United States' foreign engagements that attention to strategic communications increased in various government agencies in search of a way to achieve these ambitious and continuously expanding goals.

In the same year as the 9/11 Commission findings were published, the Defense Science Board Task Force (DSB) on strategic communications re-examined the findings it had published in 2001. It noted that 'strategic communications must be transformed. America's negative image in world opinion and diminished ability to persuade are consequences of factors other than failure to implement communications strategies. Interests collide. Leadership counts. Policies matter'.[64] Hence 'anti-American attitudes' that threaten national security, according to the authors, were not solely the result of unsuccessful public diplomacy by the Departments of Defense and State. Public opinion was influenced by 'Policies, conflicts of interest, cultural differences, memories, time, dependence on mediated information, and other factors'.[65] In other words, strategic communications was not just what was *said*, but also what was *done*. The DSB described strategic communications as:

> …a variety of instruments used by governments for generations to *understand* global attitude and culture, *engage* in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions, *advise* policymakers, diplomats, and military leaders on the public opinion implications of policy choices, and *influence* attitudes and behavior through communication strategies… Engaging the right audiences at the right time can create diplomatic opportunities, reduce tensions leading to war, help contain conflicts, and address nontraditional threats to U.S. security.[66]

63 In 2005, the turn to 'stability operations' appears in several publications by the Department of Defense, providing definitions and guidance on the integration of these concepts in the Department and the military. Stability operations, the Department states: "shall be given priority to combat operations and be explicitly addressed and integrated across all DoD activities"; Department of Defense, *Directive Number 3000.05: Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of Defence, 2005), p. 2.
64 Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2004), pp. 1-2.
65 Ibid., p. 15
66 Ibid., p. 11.

Furthermore, the authors built on the understanding of 9/11 as a symbolic rather than kinetic act. It was pivotal to recognise that 'the United States is engaged in a generational and global struggle about ideas, not a war between the West and Islam. It is more than a war against the tactic of terrorism. We must think in terms of global networks, both government and non-government'.[67] This understanding began to appear throughout the United States government communications. In 2004, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice spoke at at Michigan University: 'We are engaged primarily in a war of ideas, not of armies. It will be won by visionaries who can look past the moment…It is absolutely the case that the United States needs to put new energy into its public diplomacy.'[68]

These developments towards an understanding of strategic communications as engagement in a so-called 'war of ideas', were interwoven with a return to counterinsurgency and 'small wars' thinking as the dominant framework for approaching the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2005, Condoleezza Rice inaugurated the first Provincial Reconstruction Team deployed in Iraq. These civil-military organisations had the strategic purpose of achieving political and economic objectives, intended to build stability and 'extend the reach of the Iraqi government.'[69]

Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, who had deployed to Iraq in 2003 and subsequently served as military assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, co-authored the Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 with General David Petraeus in 2007. He had served in Haiti and Bosnia where he witnessed the consequences of the failed United Nations interventions of the 1990s.[70] Similar to stability operations, counterinsurgency centres on the need to provide security, services, and legitimacy which are essential to the success of military interventions.

67 Ibid., p. 2.
68 Condoleezza Rice, 'U.S. Needs New Energy in Public Diplomacy Campaign, Rice Says' (Washington, DC: Washington File, Department of State, 2004).
69 U.S. Department of State, 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)', *U.S. Department of State Archive 2001-2009*, (accessed 12 December 2021).
70 The United States Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007); Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl had already set out these ideas in a 2006 article: Eliot Cohen, Conrad Crane, Jan Horvath, and John Nagl, 'Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency', *Military Review* Volume 86 (2006).

This requires the military to go beyond the use of conventional military means, and to coordinate and cooperate with civilian actors.[71]

Providing the security required to achieve political objectives—rather than a focus on offensive combat operations—would secure the support of the population, undermine the ability of enemies to influence the public, and tilt the balance in favour of the United States.[72] The need to win the support of populations ('hearts and minds') not only triggered a significant expansion of military involvement in traditionally civilian activities, creating tensions between the Department of State and the Department of Defense, but also resulted in increased attention on strategic communications. However, all was not plain sailing for the COIN manual, as Fred Kaplan observed in the barely disguised resistance from the Army Intelligence Center—'we must nonconcur due to the number of critical and major issues'. Kaplan noted,

> The Intelligence Center's problem with the manual – with the whole concept of counterinsurgency – boiled down to turf. Intelligence lay at the heart of a COIN campaign: the troops live among the people, keep them secure, and build their trust – as a result of which the people supply the troops with intelligence, which is then exploited to kill or capture insurgents, which makes the people still more secure, and so the cycle continues.

The manual, he went on to say

> …stressed the need for troops to understand the cultural roots of an insurgency, such as tribes, clans, or ethnic groups…In its memo objecting to the COIN field manual, the Army Intelligence Center stated that "doctrinally there is no such thing" as cultural or social network analysis.[73]

71 Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, pp. 91-93.
72 Cohen et al., 'Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes'; Counterinsurgency doctrine became the driver of the United States military in Iraq under General Petraeus from 2008, and in Afghanistan under General Stanley McChrystal in 2009.
73 Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), pp. 213-214.

Like counterinsurgency, strategic communications—a higher order, overarching concept—would set out to project a set of values alongside its interests. Like counterinsurgency, strategic communications would fall victim to turf wars inside the administration and armed forces.

Different Agencies, Different Definitions

To engage successfully in a 'war of ideas' and achieve the ambitious goals set out by the counterinsurgency framework of the Department of Defense and the United States military, the Defense Science Board Task Force recommended that strategic communications be understood as an overarching concept which embraced public diplomacy, public affairs, information operations, and international broadcasting services. Strategic communications should be driven by presidential direction. This would bring about sweeping reforms in the direction and coordination of strategic communications. It should entail, according to its authors, installing a Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication to oversee an interagency Strategic Communication Committee. The Deputy National Security Advisor should be granted the authority to direct and plan the work of government agencies active in public diplomacy, public affairs, and military information operations.[74] Coordination, furthermore, required leadership to enable the projection of a unified message.

The need to coordinate is subsequently picked up by several United States government agencies. Jeff Jones, Director of Strategic Communications and Information at the National Security Council, wrote in 2005: 'There is little evidence of cooperation, coordination, or even more, the appreciation of the impact of strategic communication'.[75] Acknowledging the importance of strategic communications, but unsure about what it was and how it should be implemented, resulted in a range of definitions of strategic communications appearing throughout government. They vary—

74 Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report on Strategic Communication.*
75 Jeffrey B. Jones, 'Strategic Communications: A Mandate for the United States', *Joint Forces Quarterly* Volume 39 (2005).

sometimes even within agencies—but often agree on the core concept exemplified by definitions outlined below.

In 2006, the Department of Defense published its Quadrennial Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communications which defined the concept as:

> Focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power.'[76]

Recognising that the United States must re-engage publics and focus on communicating its basic values was only the first step. The ideas were there, but no consensus or understanding on how to follow through. The Policy Coordinating Committee of the National Security Council saw strategic communications as equivalent to public diplomacy. In its 2007 *National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication* it blended the two into a single concept.[77] Although still confused about the precise definition of strategic communications, the Policy Coordinating Committee significantly overlapped with the Department of Defense in emphasising that it involved not only what was said, but also the 'diplomacy of deeds', what was done. The United States, it argued, should 'tell the story of how these programs [economic and social development] are helping people improve their lives and opportunities'.[78]

The government fully embraced strategic communications in the final years of the Bush administration. Improving how they engaged with and influenced populations around the world would create a more

76 A similar definition appears in the *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms,* also published by the Department of Defense; Office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006); Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02, Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010).
77 National Security Council Policy Coordinating Committee, 'U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication' (Washington. DC: The White House, 2007), p. 2.
78 Ibid., p. 7.

positive image of the United States beyond its borders. Expectations of the potential contribution of strategic communications to efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq were high. But during a public lecture in 2007 at Kansas State University, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed:

> Public relations was invented in the United States, yet we are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and goals. It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America. As one foreign diplomat asked a couple of years ago, "How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?" Speed, agility, and cultural relevance are not terms that come readily to mind when discussing U.S. strategic communications.[79]

In his speech, Robert Gates argued that United States government institutions were outdated, lacking the capabilities to deal with a challenge such as al-Qaeda's. Even if there were to be agreement inside Washington on how to define both the concept and subsequently the vision of what long-term success might look like, the government did not have the financial and institutional capacity to achieve this. United States government institutions, including the military, had been created to fight the wars of the past, tracing their origins to the mid-1940s.[80] They were no longer able to address current and future threats which, he argued, 'require our government to operate as a whole differently – to act with unity, agility, and creativity. And they will require considerably more resources devoted to America's non-military instruments of power'.[81] New institutions were needed with a '21st century mind-set'.[82]

79 Robert Gates, 'Landon Lecture Series on Public Issues', Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, 26 November 2007.
80 Gates recalls that the United States set up the 'National Military Establishment' in 1947 by which the Department of Defense was created. Soft power instruments were subsequently developed during the Cold War, but "allowed to wither or were abandoned" from the 1990s onwards; Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.

Gates advocated for an increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security, including diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development.

Within the Department of Defense, these ideas can be found in the *National Defence Strategy* published under the leadership of Gates in 2008. Reflecting on developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, it pushed for a unified approach between military efforts and soft power capabilities. Strategic communications, it argued, was the capability to enable this unified approach to national security.[83] This would tilt the scales in favour of the United States when communicating the values it stands for to the world.[84] Strategic communications in the Department of Defense, from the publication of the 2008 *National Defence Strategy* onwards, represented a core concept across government agencies, ready to shape the environment and tilt the balance of the 'war of ideas' in favour of the United States.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS UNDER OBAMA: WHY ARE WE NOT WINNING?

Winning the support of populations beyond the borders of the United States proved much more difficult than expected, if not impossible. Less than a year after his inauguration in 2009, having withdrawn U.S. troops from Iraq, President Obama reluctantly agreed to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan.[85] In his effort to deal with the international conflicts he had inherited from the Bush administration, Obama set out to resolve the unresolved debate around strategic communications.

83 Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2008).
84 Gates continued to reform the Department of Defense strategic communications after the *National Defense Strategy of 2008*. In 2010, he ordered a Department of Defense-wide Front End Assessment study, evaluating the Department's strategic communications and information operations policy, definitions, and resources, after which significant reforms were implemented; Rosa Brooks, *Ten Years On: The Evolution of Strategic Communications and Information Operations since 9/11, Testimony before the House Armed Services Sub-Committee on Evolving Threats and Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Law Center, 2011), p. 1.
85 'Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan', 1 December 2009, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, (accessed 12 December 2021).

In 2010, the Obama administration published a *National Framework for Strategic Communications*.[86] The framework was grounded in the idea that the purpose of strategic communications was to close the 'say-do gap'. This understanding had already emerged in the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*. Rosa Brooks saw it as a more 'nuanced' understanding in a later review of strategic communications during the Obama administration.[87] The 2010 *National Framework for Strategic Communications* defined strategic communications as 'the synchronization of our words and deeds as well as deliberate efforts to communicate and engage with intended audiences'.[88] Elaborating on this, it continues: 'aligning our actions with our words is a shared responsibility that must be fostered by a culture of communication throughout government'.[89] The report acknowledged that the US needed to do a better job in understanding the opinions and grievances of populations around the world. Whereas previous frameworks emanating from the Department of Defense had understood strategic communications as an overarching set of institutional capabilities in the communications community, the White House shifted the emphasis to strategic communications being the applied synchronisation of its words and deeds. It set out three priorities. Foreign audiences should 'recognize areas of mutual interest with the United States', 'believe the United States plays a constructive role in global affairs', and 'see the United States as a respectful partner in efforts to meet complex global challenges'.[90]

Furthermore, the framework acknowledged 'the need to clarify what strategic communications mean and how we guide and coordinate our communications efforts'.[91] In addressing the need to clarify the

86 The framework setting out an interagency strategy for public diplomacy and strategic communications was a requirement of the 2009 Duncan Hunter National Defence Authorization Act and was submitted to several committees of Congress.
87 Department of Defense, 'Quadrennial Defense Review Report' (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010); Rosa Brooks, 'Confessions of a Strategic Communicator: Tales from inside the Pentagon's message machine', *Foreign Policy,* 6 December 2012, (accessed 7 November 2021).
88 This is reflected in other civilian and military agencies, including the *Marine Corps Functions Concept for Strategic Communications*, published in 2010, which states that it 'is affected significantly more by actions than by words or images'; The White House, 'National Framework for Strategic Communication' (Washington, DC: The White House, 2010), p. 1; United States Marine Corps, 'Marine Corps Operating Concepts – Third Edition' (Arlington County: United States Marine Corps, 2010).
89 The White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communication,* p. 1.
90 Ibid., p. 6
91 Ibid.

concept, the White House set up various interagency working groups to review and improve the government's ability to synchronise words and deeds. This would include re-evaluating the balance between civilian and military activities to identify those military programmes that might be more successful when taken over by civilian departments and agencies. The framework concludes with the suggestion that if the United States government could successfully foster a 'culture of communication' within its agencies and institutions, it would increase its communicative impact and result in maintaining 'global legitimacy' to supports the national interest.[92]

Strategic Communications as a Process

The *National Framework for Strategic Communication* clearly defined the essence of strategic communications as closing the say-do gap, and its purpose as furthering the national interest. But this broad understanding did little to ease the process of implementing strategic communications throughout government. In fact, it was followed by a decade that struggled with the question of how to *do* strategic communications. While more government agencies were embracing the term, discussions in the US shifted from *what we do,* to *how we do it,* and then to *who should do it.*

This trend was already apparent in 2009. The Department of Defense, which was required to report its organisational structure for strategic communications activities to the congressional defense committees, described the integration of strategic communications processes into its Department.[93] In the publication, it defined strategic communications as:

> …a process rather than as a set of capabilities, organizations, or discrete activities. In its broadest sense, "strategic communication" is the process of integrating issues of audience and stakeholder perception into policy-making, planning, and operations at every level.[94]

92 According to the framework, these include: Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy, Military Information Operations, and Defense Support to Public Diplomacy; Ibid., p. 1.
93 This requirement was part of the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009.
94 Department of Defense, *Report on Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2009).

Similar understandings of strategic communications as process appear in other Department of Defense publications. The *Quadrennial Roles and Missions Review Report* (2009) emphasised the need for strategic communications processes to 'improve the alignment of action and information with policy objectives' to 'integrate strategic communication into defense missions and to support larger U.S. policies as well as the State Department's public diplomacy priorities'.[95] Similarly the *Joint Integrating Concept for Strategic Communication* (2009) stated:

> Strategic communication is the alignment of multiple lines of operation (e.g. policy implementation, public affairs, force movement, information operations, etc.) that together generate effects to support national objectives. Strategic communication essentially means sharing meaning (i.e., communicating) in support of national objectives (i.e. strategically). This involves listening as much as transmitting, and applies not only to information, but also [to] physical communication – actions that convey meaning.[96]

The DoD went on to publish the *Strategic Communication Science and Technology Plan* in 2009, responding to calls under the 2009 National Defence Authorization Act and to the House Armed Services Committee to focus specifically on the use of scientific tools and an expanded research programme to keep up with changes in the communications environment.

Closing the say-do gap, the government realised, required more than a generic statement. In 2011, the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities of the House Armed Services Committee launched its inquiry into the evolution of strategic communications and information operations since 9/11. In his evidence to the Subcommittee, Christopher

95 Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Roles and Missions Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2009).
96 The Joint Staff, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept* (Washington, DC: US Strategic Command, 2009); *Joint Concepts* are produced by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the most senior military staff in the Department of Defense, advising the President, Secretary of Defense, Homeland Security Council and National Security Council. They address operational challenges, propose solutions, and identify the required capabilities.

Paul found that the lack of clear consensus on the definition of strategic communications was an obstruction to its progress in US government. It resulted in tensions between agencies and individuals acting on different definitions of the concept.[97] But even though the lack of a clear definition was a cause of concern, Paul concluded:

> …the United States should be thoughtful, purposive, and coordinated in efforts to inform, influence, and persuade populations in pursuit of national policy objectives. If strategic communication as a term is too vague, too contested, or becomes politically untenable, abandon it. Just do not allow the underlying effort to coordinate government impact on the information environment to be lost too.[98]

Rosa Brooks, former senior advisor to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Michele Flourney, made the opposite argument. In her statement to the Subcommittee she argued that 'strategic communications is as much art as science, and it's part of the long game'.[99] She develops this thought:

> Strategic communication is hard because it's *hard*. Strategic communication is, in a fundamental sense, an *aspirational* concept. We're never going to get it 100% right; there are always going to be too many variables, many of them beyond our control. But as a government, we still have to try…Effective strategic communication requires decentralization, which creates risk. We *will* make mistakes. Somewhere, right now, some US government employee is doing something dumb, maybe even illegal, in the name of strategic communication. It's just inevitable. But there's been a tendency, in the media and a bit here on the Hill, to throw the baby out with the bathwater.[100]

97 Christopher Paul, *Getting Better at Strategic Communication, Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011).
98 Ibid., p. 18
99 Brooks, *Ten Years On,* pp. 12-13.
100 Ibid., pp. 5, 12.

In her statement, Brooks advocates a looser approach to strategic communications. One with 'less naval-gazing obsession with who does what' and 'less obsession with metrics and assessments'.[101] Strategic communications, for her, is about shifting the long-term discourses in society. These cannot be measured in a timeframe, and require a more flexible, agile approach that does not get stuck in what she refers to as a 'zero-defect mentality'.[102] The concept, according to Brooks, remains confusing and could have been an unnecessary addition to the range of concepts already in existence. But it is here now. She finds:

> Ideally, the term could serve as a reminder that *everything* is a form of communication – that our actions can speak as loudly as our words, and that wise officials, military and civilian alike, must consider the "information effects" of all that they say and do – from press statements to changes in force posture.[103]

CONCLUSION

This is a story without an end. More a genealogy or chronology than a final word. Our decade is one that has already witnessed seismic shifts in foreign and security policy. The debate around defining strategic communications will continue as nation states transition from an age of small wars and proxy conflicts to a new Great Power geopolitics. The desire to project power while balancing persuasion against coercion, and the ambitious pursuits of ideologically opposed states and political movements set on winning the argument in the public space will only sharpen the need to address 'what is strategic communications?'. And while for the time being the debate may have run short of steam in Washington, across fellow NATO memberstates the work continues with alacrity. Military doctrine writers and practice-oriented academics continue to explore whether mindset, process, or techniques remain the most productive lenses through which to view the projection of

101 Ibid., pp. 12-13.
102 Ibid., p. 12.
103 Brooks, 'Confessions of a Strategic Communicator.'

persuasion and coercion in the dynamic and turbulent 2020s. As a consensus emerges among thinkers outside the US, so geopolitics is already reshaping the environment into which communicators are projecting their ideas and values. Consequently, any consensus will invite revision in thinking as only befits the best policy and scholarly inquiry.

What organisational turf wars can disguise in the contested ways that agencies explain strategic communications is a privileging of institutional interest over national interest, albeit seemingly advanced with the best intentions. What should never be hidden, however, is that strategic communications speaks to the projection of values, not simply the instrumentalising of process or technique. Hence it is understood in certain NATO circles as 'a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.[104]

Two decades after 9/11, the United States has withdrawn its forces from Afghanistan. Strategic communications proved not to be the panacea for the sizeable challenges ISAF/NATO faced there. Perhaps unsurprisingly, three decades of debate in this field leave more questions unanswered than resolved. The tensions that underpin this field of research and practice return the debate to the art-versus-science conundrum. At the same time, they highlight the need to position its proponents at the inception of the policy- and decision-making cycle, not at the end. Today China and Russia present strategic threats to western democracies. And so too does militant Islam. Rarely has it been so pressing for the West to align its rhetoric and actions for fear of the consequences.

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104 Bolt & Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, p. 46.

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