UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE
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This is the third publication by the NATO Strategic Communications Terminology Working Group. It continues to convene experts from academic, political, military, and business worlds to advance the language of strategic communications. The previous publications 'Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology' and 'Clarifying Digital Terms' can be viewed at stratcomcoe.org

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Introduction: Changing understanding of threats and security

By Dr Neville Bolt

When the founding treaty that would bring NATO into being in April 1949 was underwritten by twelve signatory nations, the world looked a very different place. The backdrop was dire. The outlook even more so.

George Kennan's 'Long Telegram' in 1946 had already warned of a threat from an expansionist Soviet Union intent on exporting communism to the West and depriving millions of Europeans of their freedom.[1] US President Harry Truman had come to the aid of those European populations—afflicted with hunger, homelessness, pestilence, and national bankruptcy. By launching an unprecedented public diplomacy policy, the Marshall Plan, freedom would be preserved through a rebuilding of economies and revival of cooperation between trading nations.[2]

Barely two years before the treaty signing, at the invitation of the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, the Mont Pelerin Society had convened a body of august economists, philosophers, and historians committed to staving off the advance of tyranny. Their alarm was palpable: 'over large stretches of the Earth's surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared'.[3] Red-baiting turned into witch-hunting in the United States as the House Un-American Activities Committee went about its business. Hot wars fought in Korea and Indo-China would eventually give way to proxy wars waged on the African continent—save for one confrontation over Cuba. But all were minded to keep East and West from obliterating each other with their nuclear arsenals. Nevertheless, security had to be preserved at all costs through a maze of mind games and second-guessing: this was the Cold War.

The parties to the North Atlantic Treaty had pledged themselves to 'collective defense and for the preservation of peace and security'.[4] That concept of security had embraced fundamental values of freedom, common heritage and civilisation, and the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law—all promised in the name of men, women, and children but guaranteed by nation states. In the years and decades that followed, security would come to be viewed in different ways, sometimes favouring the state as its referent, sometimes the individual. Particularly as Cold War bipolarity gave way to a fresh multipolar world, new times would see humanitarian causes shift the focus of attention more closely onto individual suffering and rights of redress.

As if to illustrate 'the hazards of a weakly conceptualised but politically powerful concept like security',[5] international relations scholars in the intervening years have come to treat security through a number of theoretical lenses which mirror historic changes in geopolitics and the pursuit of normative values. The underlying question of 'whose security?' would open up a controversial set of arguments.

(i) Security, for many, has traditionally been identified with securing the state, if not the 'national interest'. But the interests of the

state should not be confused with securing the lives of nationalities, many of whom have suffered persecution at the hands of their own governments and neighbouring national identity communities in the same state.

(ii) Other theorists, by contrast, looked at the sub-state level, arguing that the individual should be the focus of any security policy, since the state without its population as its main priority had little that was worth securing.

(iii) The individual as referent was a step too far for others. Society should be the dominant lens to avoid attaching an instrumentalist impulse to the behaviour and motives of identity groups that make up society.

(iv) Again, others would choose to focus on the interplay between these lower levels and collective groups, and explore the tensions through an array of societal tiers stretching all the way up to the international system.

(v) Recently, scholars have brought an ecological perspective to secure the future of the planet, emphasising the relationship of individuals within the ecosystem and any threats which they might bring to it.[6]

Barry Buzan's attempt to answer why security is often regarded as conceptually underdeveloped explores various possibilities. This 'essentially contested concept' defies complex analysis because it is inherently ambiguous and lacks precision, rather like the notions of peace and power. A more persuasive argument suggests that in the face of World War II and the Cold War, confrontation power was perceived, if erroneously, as synonymous with security. But as witnessed during periods of détente, power would then become an inadequate way of understanding security. However, security theories that had become associated with realist approaches such as deterrence, viewed as a process to achieve the strategic objective of containment, would invite a pushback from idealists. These thinkers preferred to emphasise notions of peace, arms control, and disarmament. Equally, economic shocks to the West from oil crises and subsequent stagflation in the 1970s also led to a turning away from narrow, militaristic notions of security, inviting a political economy perspective rooted in the way countries around the world were interconnected through the fluctuations and manipulations of markets and interests.

Nuclear stalemate and the perception of mutually assured destruction (MAD), if anything, would hive off the militaristic notion of security into its own intellectual space, which in turn would fail to integrate itself into ideas of interconnectedness and the network society. Alternatively, a darker reading has been advanced. By playing up threats from abroad, states could divert attention away from their attempts to increase military spending and introduce greater surveillance and controls on domestic populations: 'Threats in the international system are nearly always real enough to make their exaggeration credible.'[7] These various insights question and perhaps underline why theorising around security has underperformed in the eyes of its critics. Uncertainty, confusion, and ambiguity pervade attempts to define security, but they also speak to its very essence.

Uncertainty is a constant in geopolitics. The world is anarchic, lacking any central authority. When the realist Kenneth Waltz proposes that 'to expect states of any sort to reliably rest at peace in a condition of anarchy would require the uniform and enduring perfection of them all',[8] he is only highlighting the security dilemma that faces all governments, and what Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler from the liberal-realist tradition of international relations scholarship have described as 'the quintessential dilemma in international politics'.[9] They sum up the dilemma that permeates all approaches to security: 'the inability of the decision-makers of one state to get into the minds of their counterparts in other states, and so understand their motives and intentions with confidence', set against 'the inherent ambiguity of weapons. The policy planners of one state can never predict with complete certainty when and how weapons might be employed by other states'.[10] For these authors this represents the beginning of a two-level dilemma—first, one

of *'interpretation is the result of the perceived need to make a decision in the existential condition of **unresolvable uncertainty** about the motives, intentions and capabilities of others'*. And second, *'Should they signal, by words and deeds, that they will react in kind, for deterrent purposes? Or should they seek to signal reassurance?'*[11] For strategic communications perception and misperception by political leaders may forever be part of the human condition.[12]

While security studies have taken state-on-state competition to be the driving force behind our understanding of security, the world of development has shaped an alternative way of conceptualising it. Particularly since World War II, and following Truman's inaugural address in 1946 where he launched the 'era of development' with the words: 'The peoples of the earth face the future with grave uncertainty, composed almost equally of great hopes and great fears [...] What we envisage is a program of development based on the concept of democratic fair dealing.'[13] By the end of the century, however, a loss of confidence in the ability to address poverty and development from the affluent North would lead sector experts like Robert Chambers to reduce his own definition of development to a less than ambitious 'good change',[14] while critics like David Korten saw populations continually trapped in a 'global threefold human crisis': in other words, 'deepening poverty, social disintegration and environmental destruction'.[15]

Human security and its protection (or lack of it) would come to the fore in the 1990s—and surprisingly through an international agency created to safeguard the lives of the vulnerable around the world: the United Nations. The fall of the Soviet empire and end of the Cold War were met with a brief triumphalism captured by one academic with his subsequently maligned phrase 'the end of history', a reference to the defeat of communism and the global embrace of capitalism.[16] Against this background, a renewed self-confidence emerged in the United Nations under the leadership of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, with the launch of R2P (Responsibility to Protect)—a policy that enshrined the principle of humanitarian

intervention where sovereign borders could be rightfully and militarily breached by the international community to secure the lives of people under attack from their own governments.[17] A later High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change in 2004 reinforced the tone with a renewed commitment: 'A more secure world is only possible if poor countries are given a real chance to develop.'[18] But more dramatically it paved the way for a series of moves including 'In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All', endorsed by the secretary-general in 2005, the Outcome Document of the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly later that year, and its subsequent inclusion in the World Summit 2005. The responsibility to protect was in the process of becoming 'an emerging norm of a collective responsibility to protect'.[19]

First, however, the organisation would be rocked by three shocks: in Somalia in 1993, when UNSOM failed to secure the environment as events rapidly escalated from internal conflict to the blockage of relief for food shortages, to widespread famine; in Rwanda in 1994, when some 800,000 minority Tutsis were butchered by their Hutu neighbours with no humanitarian intervention forthcoming from the UN to arrest the slaughter; and in Bosnia in 1995, when in one incident Dutch UN peacekeepers failed to prevent the massacre of as 8000 Bosniak Muslim men and boys were massacred by Bosnian Serb forces.

Meanwhile the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen contributed to understandings around human security by highlighting the role of human agency in famines. No longer were these to be assumed to be acts of nature but the outcomes of human intent—political actions, frequently economically motivated. By comparing the results of interventions in food shortages and the alarming decline of access to supplies between China and India, Sen demonstrated how human security could be undermined. China with its hierarchical system of command and control within the one-party state and officials' fear of punishment at lower levels of the bureaucracy would compare unfavourably with the record of

India, the world's largest democracy, where a free press could signal early warnings before famine was able to take hold.[20] Hence a free press and free speech sit at the heart of the way security should be thought about, if not interrogated and supported.

Neoliberal economic philosophy, which had originated with Hayek and his colleagues in the 1940s as a way of securing peace and stability in the lives of Europeans, free from the Soviet grip, would by the 1980s come to be criticised as a force for destabilising less developed economies. Countries which had earned their foreign exchange by exporting commodities or borrowing on capital markets experienced dire consequences.[21] Structural adjustment programmes promoted by the IMF and World Bank were championed politically by US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. By 'rolling back the state' and deregulating domestic markets, while relieving tariffs, quotas, and taxation, new investment capital would flood in from abroad. Unfortunately, those flows intent on producing free markets and competition would serve to the detriment of domestic businesses not blessed with the same resources, and undermine local employment where wages would be driven down. The knock-on effect on human security was dramatic, particularly in societies where governance institutions were weak and where the state or 'quasi-states'[22] had often been 'hollowed out'.[23] The optimism of the South Commission in those early days following the Cold War now seems to have been premature: 'The easing of East-West tensions may, in addition, contribute to reducing the incidence and scale of armed conflict in the South, and as a consequence allow the South to economize on military expenditure and concentrate on development.'[24]

Many of these ideas and tropes above are captured in NATO's 2030 Reflection Group Report. A brief survey of its contents includes an eclectic mix of 'Threats and Challenges from Every Direction': Russia; China; Emerging and Disruptive Technology; Terrorism; The South; Arms Control and Nuclear Deterrence; Energy Security; Climate and Green Defence; Human Security and Women, Peace, and Security; Pandemics and Natural Disasters; Hybrid and Cyber Threats; Outer Space.[25] The sheer diversity and scale of these perceived threats are dramatic for any political-military alliance historically confined to a territorial remit and defined by its opposition to a particular state enemy. It is against this backdrop that *Terminology 3* attempts to clarify some of the language and terms at the heart of many of these debates around future threats.

For NATO the fundamental challenge remains: 'To secure "the West" as a geo-cultural entity in the absence of its constitutive Other, the Cold War "East", required the systematic and reiterative definition of its newly defined enemies.'[26] Yet this can only be resolved by assessing the dynamic changes that beset the world in the early millennium. Not to understand the proximate and underlying causes of a historical convergence of factors—a near perfect storm—fails to reveal why each trope or topic causes NATO such soul-searching.[27] In response to the security threat and subsequent dilemma of one sub-state actor, al-Qaeda, in 2001, US President George Bush was roundly criticised for declaring a Global War on Terror. To fight a political phenomenon such as terror—as elusive as a pandemic or natural resource shortage—rather than a political or geopolitical actor remains a thankless task, if not a linguistically and epistemologically unsound one too.

Terminology 3 sets out to confine its remit to the examination of language, always favouring plain speaking. Its authors recognise that future threats to security (or many varied insecurities) will affect and so must be intelligible to diverse readers, not simply subject experts. After all, isn't every one of us an expert on the insecurities in our own lives?

Chapter 1

Point of departure: The evolution of understandings of strategic communications

By Martha Stolze

This chapter seeks to capture the different perspectives on strategic communications (StratCom) that have appeared in the first ten volumes of the *Defence Strategic Communications* academic journal.[28] This emergent field will always be a work in progress and opinions will remain contested as befits any academic and praxis-oriented area of study. From seventy-eight articles the following discussion draws on twenty-five, in addition to the editor's forewords in several volumes.

The argument here is driven by the approach that definitions of StratCom should not be confined to an instrumental modus operandi—or restricted at an institutional level or tied to a linear understanding of communications. Instead, a more complex, holistic approach grants agency to any target audience and recognises that multiple external factors compete for influence in a contested environment. Understandings of StratCom should further encompass an ethical component, spelling out underlying values, and clarifying whether projecting StratCom should be the preserve of liberal-democratic states only.

Strategic communications tries to distance itself theoretically from other forms of political persuasion, like election campaigns or commercial marketing, and from propaganda, where the purpose of this associated field is understood as one of deception. Various scholars situate StratCom within a social constructivist framework, familiar to international relations, concerned with the power of language to construct meaning, and to shape and shift discourses—in an interplay between persuasion and coercion. The origins of StratCom lie in an impetus to understand actors and audiences, how they communicate, and how the content and ways and means of communications shape social bonds and the worlds people inhabit. This impetus can be traced back to thinkers of the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s and 1930s, who argued 'that media and communication have a central role to play in shaping individual and collective lives, and in cementing identities and communities'.[29] However, the wealth of competing definitions can problematise a comprehensive understanding of the term, not least because this field of study continues to evolve quickly.

As a foundation for further thought, this section provides an overview of the evolution of understandings of the concept since the term was introduced into NATO usage in 2007, and especially in the years following the 2014 Wales Summit, when the NATO Heads of State and Government declared their intention to enhance StratCom. The evolution of terms inside NATO's central organisation is considered, as well as those used by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) and especially by authors of *Defence Strategic Communications*. Since this journal publishes the ideas of academics and practitioners alike, it is a suitable point of departure for tracing back how understandings of StratCom have changed since its first issue, published in 2016. The past results of the StratCom COE terminology project are

incorporated as these aimed equally at illuminating and streamlining the debate between academics and practitioners of terms used in the StratCom field. However, this chapter does not claim to be exhaustive, and rather seeks to provide an overview of pertinent debates. The StratCom definitions are distinguished by broad characteristics, spanning instrumental to holistic approaches.

The origins of strategic communications in NATO

While the evolution of StratCom precedes NATO's embrace of the term, StratCom found its way into NATO documents in 2007. After the ISAF/NATO Afghanistan mission had moved from peace support to counter-insurgency, in 2007 the *Action Plan on NATO's Strategic Communications and What is StratCom: An informal guide* emerged inside NATO. But it wasn't until 2008 that the Allied Command Operations directive ACO 95-2 underlined a central role of NATO StratCom, stating that for mission success 'on occasion, policies and actions will even need to be adapted in response to the imperatives of Strategic Communication'.[30] This foreshadowed a leading role for StratCom in guiding action, but it took another decade for the first NATO StratCom military doctrine to be developed.

A first milestone was reached when the NATO Heads of State and Government declared StratCom to be integral to achieving the Alliance's strategic and military objectives in 2009, followed by NATO Strategic Communications Policy PO(2009)0141. The latter defined StratCom as:

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.[31]

This policy tried to incorporate the projection of StratCom into existing NATO structures—it detailed how to fit StratCom into the existing institutions of NATO, without offering a definition of its essence, namely what it was.

Nevertheless, StratCom had notably found its way into the institution, as, according to Laity, the 2009 policy 'codified that the communication disciplines fell under the StratCom umbrella'.[32] In these early days, however, the emphasis of StratCom still inclined towards communicating strategically rather than projecting strategic communications.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, at the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, NATO Heads of State and Government declared that 'enhancing Strategic Communications' played a role in addressing hybrid warfare threats effectively. The 2015 *Strategy on NATO's Role in Countering Hybrid Warfare* subsequently called for enhanced synergy between all its communication disciplines by including public affairs, PsyOps, and InfoOps within a StratCom grouping. It was seen as an important stepping stone, as it clearly positioned StratCom at the centre, producing synergy between all communication disciplines, rather than being an add-on. Still, this process brought the 'inform versus influence' debate to the surface, with public affairs personnel rejecting guidance by StratCom while pointing to their primary goal of informing not influencing audiences—particularly the journalistic community, with whom they felt they risked losing credibility.[33] While this stance may be considered disingenuous if one recognises that the act of deciding which information to include or exclude, and how to present it, already influences the way it is perceived, it derived from trying to avoid a public outcry over perceived NATO military influence operations on its own populations

More directly for the military, the *NATO Military Committee Policy on Strategic Communications* was also issued in 2015. It recognised that clarifying relationships among

all communication functions and in existing policies 'may lead to further revision of other information-related MCs'.[34] This statement was critical in enabling further change. *MC0628* was endorsed by the NAC[35] in 2017 and in principle underlined the central position of StratCom, with all operational activity being driven by an understanding of narrative and discourse. A 2017 policy statement by SHAPE[36] further defined StratCom as 'the integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the information environment in support of NATO aims and objectives'.[37] Merging the kinetic and the discursive had moved to the fore in doctrinal debate.

Since then, the wider integration of StratCom principles and practices across NATO's military, as outlined in MC0628, has led to the development of a top-level military doctrine for all NATO operations, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications' (AJP-10).[38] This first-ever NATO StratCom doctrine is meant to provide a common framework for the NATO Military Instrument of Power (MIoP), constituted by the NATO Command Structure (NCS), and the Allied national and multinational forces and headquarters placed at the NCS's disposal (NATO Force Structure, NFS), for better structured information and communication activities and processes in Allied Joint Operations. It defines the 'StratCom function' as

In the NATO military context, the integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the information environment, in support of NATO strategic aims and objectives.

AJP-10 thus not only carries forward the clear development over the years towards putting StratCom centre stage as the function integrating all NATO military activities: it also marks a major step forward for implementing StratCom on all levels of command. It commits NATO StratCom to overarching principles which are relevant for all NATO military activities:[39]

- values-based—all activity is founded on NATO's values

- objective-driven—activity is driven by objectives that are derived from policy strategy and narrative, and issued within a framework of political-military direction, and they must be measurable for assessment

- credible—credibility and trust are vital attributes and must be protected

- aligned—actions, images, and words need to be aligned

- informed—the information environment must be understood

- integrated—communication is the collective and integrated effect of our activities, images, and words

- empowered—communication is empowered at all levels of command; and

- focused—the focus of activities is on desired effects and objectives.

In light of these principles, NATO StratCom nests its narrative-led[40] approach in the Alliance's overarching ('grand') narrative established by the preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty from 1949, which established democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law as the core tenets of the free civilisation to be safeguarded by the Alliance. Overall, AJP-10 makes NATO StratCom an endeavour clearly defined and oriented by liberal values.

A normative framework is, therefore, not only constitutional for NATO as a whole, but specifically for NATO StratCom, in pursuit of protecting its credibility, and not simply for practical reasons. While credibility is instrumental for maintaining a position of influence, being true to one's values in line with a

benevolent attachment to human dignity aims to ensure the Alliance is a force for good in the world. As Mark Laity, former SHAPE director of communications, put it: 'If NATO does not live up to its values, it is nothing.'[41]

Evolution of understandings of strategic communications since 2015

The thinking of academics and practitioners around the term and field of study has evolved in parallel to these developments inside NATO. Broader definitions feature alongside the NATO definitions presented above. In contrast to instrumental notions which tend to favour a more linear cause-and-effect way of thinking about communications, authors in *Defence Strategic Communications*, as well as the NATO StratCom COE Terminology Working Group, have increasingly espoused a holistic approach. It is argued that successful StratCom needs to better understand its target audience, and take account of ethical considerations.

In *Defence Strategic Communications* the evolution in thinking began with a focus on strategy in communications, meaning that strategy is inherently about communications.[42]

This was the start of an uphill battle which is still ongoing and is a metaphor that not incidentally takes its cue from the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus: 'to find a common space for scholars to develop concepts that speak to the real world, and for practitioners to step back from the tactical to appreciate what makes strategic communications truly strategic is long overdue'.[43]

As early as 2017, strategic communications was seen as preoccupied with tactics and techniques, as well as increasingly concerned with technology, missing the complex and dynamic positioning of competing ideas and values in contiguous, multiple communication environments. That called for an equally dynamic interplay of strategy and tactics.[44]

A variety of approaches

Several distinctions may be drawn between diverse interpretations of StratCom: (i) instrumentalism and essentialism; (ii) linearity and non-linearity; and (iii) conceiving StratCom as a mindset rather than a process, or even a technique or tool.

(i) An instrumentalist understanding of StratCom asks what StratCom does, and how it achieves it; an essentialist approach asks what it is. Essentialism looks to the nature of the relationship between individuals and the world around them—to seeing themselves as communicating beings and understanding ontologically how they fit into that world by attaching meanings to objects around them. But it goes further. Those meanings become vested in sets of values and interests which define each person. In short, this is StratCom as a concept. In the application of StratCom, the mindset lens comes closest to providing a bridge between concept and practice. More abstract, it is the least instrumentalised. By contrast, an instrumentalist reading considers the ways and means that help deliver ideas to achieve behaviour change. It explains why a number of definitions see words, images, actions, and non-actions less as semiotic texts than as tangible techniques which can help segmented and identified audiences to understand intended meanings.

(ii) A unidirectional or linear understanding of communications pictures them as directed from sender to receiver. But a sender's output may be simply one in a multidirectional,

'noisy' space filled with competing actors where each audience has its own agency and voice. In fact, audiences may refute some claims while accepting others. As producers too they may communicate ideas independent of external stimuli—theirs need not be counter-narratives but originating narratives.

Hence a linear approach leans towards an instrumental desire to exercise command and control over the content and effects of communications. That the environment in which one communicates is both dynamic and contested is a view shared by proponents of both linear and non-linear communications. However, linearity privileges agency over structure and underlines the desire to exert the communicator's will over their adversaries. Non-linearity, by contrast, favours the view that communicators occupy a serendipitous environment dominated by billions of connected audiences who also act as producers, each exerting their own agency and creating unexpected and unforeseen effects.

Non-linearity recognises a world of complexity and consequently removes a degree of agency from strategic communicators. A consequence of digitally connected information and communications technologies made available to consumers at low prices, it emphasises the connectivity of both electronic networks and physical, human networks—the new and the old—as a theatre of ever accelerating interaction.

(iii) The debate around whether StratCom is a mindset locates the individual ontologically in a mediated universe which serves as a permanent theatre to all human life. It is inescapable and irreversible. It is set to 'on' 24/7. While this may be viewed as technologically determinist, such a lens points to the need for all actors—as communicators in a communicators' world—to understand the consequences of their words or actions. Hence all politics—in war and peace—are played out inside the media space. Consequently, media outlets and their representatives are not itinerant visitors to the political space. Imagined normatively, this mindset understanding

should become intuitive in human beings over time, albeit realistically over generations.

By contrast, to understand StratCom as a toolbox or set of techniques that can change the way people think and behave suggests an approach where the significant difference depends on available budgets and the capacity to scale them up or down to meet fresh communications challenges. The skills of the communications expert are celebrated here, together with a constant refinement of technologies capable of predicting human behaviour and affecting it. More commonly, it speaks to the world of the practitioner where tactics and campaigns dominate.

At the same time, organisations such as governments understandably wish to harmonise bureaucratic processes. Accordingly, policies can be presented with one voice and a consensual viewpoint to reduce confusion in the minds of audiences while refining the so-called message and underpinning the credibility of the communicator. In this scenario, StratCom will be expected to be sensitive to institutional constraints.

Finally, whether one favours a holistic approach may depend on how all-embracing one's view of StratCom is conceptually. Holism can become synonymous with a mindset approach where the idea that everything communicates is prevalent. However, it is frequently translated by practitioners into meaning that one draws on all the assets and resources at the would-be communicator's disposal to pursue a particular course of action. It is not surprising, then, that 'cross-government' or 'whole of government' epithets are readily applied to the daily pursuit of this activity.

When formulated by states we talk of cross-government or whole of government approaches, of fusion, and of different ways of treating information in the state's armoury. DIME—Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economics, with its distinct preserves, is challenged increasingly in the instantaneous and digitally-connected 21st century, so that Information becomes subsumed into those

other three pillars of state engagement, DME. Nevertheless, historians may argue it was ever thus. For thousands of years, states or administrative elites seeking to control populations and challenge foreign elites for resources and control of territory, have always mobilised the full array of assets at their disposal.[45]

Many authors have followed both an instrumentalist understanding of StratCom as 'the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission' (a corporate sector definition) and/or as a matter of process, namely 'coordinated communication activities to advance an organisation's aim'.[46] Understanding StratCom in line with the NATO policy PO(2009)0141 yielded a more military-focused, but also 'very functional, superficial'[47] definition, seeking to coordinate NATO communications activities and capabilities to achieve its aims—again through the lens of process. These definitions can be critiqued for placing importance 'not on the relational aspect of communication or the content of communication, but rather on the mechanics, technology, infrastructure, roles of different types of communicators'[48]—therefore through the lens of techniques or tools.

Although focused less on the military sphere, a similar critique may apply to the common interpretation of StratCom either as 'an ongoing synchronization of images, actions and words to get a desired effect',[49] or as

> *the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives.*[50]

To refine the latter definition, it has been pointed out that StratCom also uses omissions and silence, action and a failure to act, to change attitudes and behaviour,[51] and aims at long-term rather than short-term effects.[52] The long-term perspective is one of the key dimensions of what makes StratCom 'strategic', aiming 'to shift and shape discourses well into the future'.[53] Some authors further confine StratCom to the sphere of foreign and security policies, tasked with 'the projection of foreign and security policy […] in the national interest or interest of a political community'.[54] Both national interest and political community speak to who qualifies as a strategic communicator, suggesting by this definition a state, would-be state, or significant sub-state and trans-state actor. Overall, the general thrust of understandings, including refinements, appears linear and functionalist.

Accordingly, it has been stressed that StratCom 'is often misunderstood as linear and transactional rather than complex, dynamic, adaptable, and never-ending',[55] embedded in a constantly changing society and environment. Or, put differently, the presented perspectives can be seen as positivist accounts which tend to 'subjectify the role of [StratCom] in the construction of human knowledge in their attempt to model future responses to action'.[56] This ignores the complexity of communications and of multilevel societal power relations, as well as the normative component that guides human action when forming identities, interests, and values.

Strategic communications as a holistic approach

The 2019 definition of the StratCom COE Terminology Workshop Group moved away from a solely instrumental understanding, no longer simply describing what StratCom does but also what it is. It defined StratCom as:

A holistic approach to communication based on values and interests **that encompasses everything an actor does** to achieve objectives in a contested environment.[57]

This approach reflects the view that everything communicates. It assumes that an individual's understanding of the world is constructed and can be influenced by communication. It acknowledges that in a 'contested environment' where an actor operates, information cannot be controlled but at best influenced, thus allowing for external factors to play a role.[58] The holistic approach is not completely opposed to an instrumental view, as it encompasses the possibility of using StratCom as a tool to further one's aims (achieve objectives). The holistic understanding thus reads StratCom as a mindset and as a process and as a set of tools, but never simply as a toolbox.[59]

Such a broad definition is preferable since it more accurately depicts the complexity (including the multi-directionality) of communications, and therefore paints a more realistic picture of possible communications effects, at the same time leaving room for resistance or alternative sources of communicating ideas. This StratCom approach can take account of multilevel societal power relations. It also underlines questions of ethics, since StratCom is based not only on 'interests', but also on 'values'.

Which values? Normative considerations

At first sight the holistic approach seems to allow for 'everything an actor does to achieve objectives', which might span anything from public diplomacy to propaganda.[60] However, it must be underlined that StratCom according to this definition does not allow for literally 'everything' an actor does, but constrains action confined to an actor's values (instead of being just interest-driven). Normative limits to action are thus stressed. But they may invite clarification.

Demands to include norms and values in definitions of StratCom have increased since 2015. On the one hand, some scholars have merely attributed an instrumental role to them—referencing norms and values only to render the content more accessible to and identifiable by targeted audiences, and thereby influence those audiences more effectively, rather than to bring out the inherent value of the proposition. Clearly, reflecting ethical and normative elements of social behaviour helps to increase 'moral justification, credibility, and legitimacy'[61] of StratCom.

On the other hand, using norms instrumentally to achieve one's goals undermines their purpose of guiding overall action. Normative considerations can serve as constraints to limit an actor's StratCom activities, guiding its action concerning what is permissible and what isn't. Accordingly, the 2019 COE Terminology Workshop project and subsequently several scholars have demanded the pursuit of high-level strategic goals in adherence to certain values to cohere values and actions, words and deeds.[62] StratCom has been viewed nevertheless instrumentally, as 'an action that necessarily takes place within, and draws its efficacy from, ethical architectures'.[63] This calls for ethical considerations that emerge from an actor's self-understanding and form the basis for the way it acts.

Closing the say–do gap?

Can StratCom be truthful and transparent? As early as 2009, US President Barack Obama made a claim for integrity and credibility, arguing that they should be the foundations of good StratCom. And that this too should be ensured by synchronising words and deeds, thus closing what he called the 'say-do gap'.[64]

Conflicting positions exist on the question. More pessimistic accounts hold that StratCom not only is engaged in truth-telling, but also 'involves priming the audience, framing events and "spinning the narrative"'.[65] Still, while the appeal to certain shared norms for some is merely rhetorical, others argue that the degree to which StratCom resonates with a consistent ethical framework determines its persuasive power. Being viewed as having lied or misled the audience is sanctioned: it renders future exercises of StratCom 'more difficult, or even impossible, as it damages an actor's credibility'.[66] However, this view assumes that there is only one audience. Instead, a misleading account of an event might resonate favourably with one audience but not with another. Russia justified its attack on Ukraine as a limited 'special operation' to 'denazify' Ukraine, seeking to strengthen its position vis-à-vis its own population and allies, while the attack was condemned as a clear violation of international law in the West.[67]

At the other end of the spectrum, scholars suggest that StratCom never intends to mislead, but 'is about strategic impact through credible narrative [and is] always honest '.[68] StratCom then gains authenticity by closing the 'say–do gap'—not only to gain credibility but also out of moral reasoning. National interests 'must never become an excuse for dishonesty' with StratCom being 'weaponised honesty, not opportunistic relativism'.[69]

At the heart of this discussion is a distinction between persuasion and coercion, which will be expanded upon by Neville Bolt in Chapter 2 of this publication. While some authors see StratCom rather as a persuasive power, others describe it as a form of discursive coercion. Overall, many identify an interplay or balance between persuasion and coercion to achieve desired outcomes.[70] Namely, according to Bolt, while StratCom pursues persuasion through rational argument seeking the moral high ground, coercion must always underpin a state's credibility to act. That credibility sits within a tension between authority and legitimacy. Both concepts speak to when persuasion and force become morally acceptable forms of communication. This 'continual calibration' between persuasion and coercion is a key mechanism but also a consequence of the exercise of power in a contested environment.[71]

Can any political community practise StratCom?

The requirement of StratCom to be exercised only within certain normative boundaries further raises the question of who can 'do StratCom'. Can any entity function as a strategic communicator as long as it acts according to its own values? This would universalise the notion to not only democracies but also autocracies. Or is the exercise of StratCom confined to liberal-democratic actors/states/communities and, thus, restricted to a specific set of embedded values? Which of these would form the liberal-democratic core and how far would they have to be enacted? This fundamental

question needs to be more clearly articulated and remains largely absent from scholarly and military-practitioner debate.

Notably, Chinese academics have paid consistent attention to the theory and practice of StratCom in the West. Their observations have not gone unnoticed in the higher reaches of the Chinese Communist Party. Accordingly, China can be argued to exercise propaganda internally, while it engages externally in StratCom vis-à-vis other countries in the international community using 'external

propaganda'.[72] Turning to Russia, it has been proposed that the Kremlin also engages in StratCom domestically, to mobilise Russian public opinion, and abroad.[73] But at the same time, it does not use the term strategic communications. Rather it sees the concept as already subsumed into its foreign and security policy. Which then poses the question: if authoritarian regimes can exercise StratCom, does it render the term objectively neutral, and so place it at the disposal of any state?

A further question prompts the debate whether only states or also non-state actors can project StratCom. For instance, international organisations like the United Nations or humanitarian non-governmental organisations engage with China beyond the profit motive to question consumers' ability to exercise free speech; we would call them strategic communicators. Heavily subsidised and highly engineered, the modern arsenal of StratCom-ready capabilities maintained by states, corporations, religious institutions, and non-governmental organisations might even have elevated it to a status potentially detrimental to the public good, with the power to devastate traditional ideas of community realisation and self-determination.[74] With great power comes great responsibility. Nevertheless, derived from the notion that the make-up of the modern information space is levelling the playing field, the idea of a shift from state- to non-state-actors as dominant proponents of strategic communications was accepted with little qualification.

Even with regard to ethics in the field of international relations, there is neither differentiation between state- and non-state actors, nor qualification of strategic communications as essentially benign. But for NATO members, 'strategic communications has been viewed as an essential component of an effective response to campaigns by hostile state and non-state actors seeking to shape public opinion and attitudes in pursuit of their own strategic objectives'.[75] Over the course of debates resulting from these and other assertions, a societal security and defence dimension, seemingly inherent in strategic communications, has taken shape. Strategic communications addresses predominantly threats and challenges to individual freedoms provided by liberally constituted societies. These threats may take the form of foreign interference by disinformation, underlying social conflicts rendering groups and individuals more receptive, or even the trappings of a postmodernist torpedoing of liberal public discourses.[76] Strategic communications seems to revolve around *res publica*.

Understanding target audiences, and appreciating agency of speaker and audience

A final aspect is worth highlighting. The concept of the 'active audience' still needs to be addressed. It 'proposes that individuals modify the information they receive by interpreting it through the lens of their own cultural experience'.[77] While this reflection is absent from the definitions above, scholars and practitioners have steadily pointed towards the need to understand more deeply target audiences as a key to effective StratCom. A rich understanding of any audience should precede addressing certain population segments before promoting normative types of behaviour change. This speaks to how StratCom should appreciate the agency of both speaker and audience,[78] and should not be divorced from the 'immediate concerns of those on which it is intended to have an effect'[79]—else it would constitute a mere one-sided, top-down concept. Overall, a more audience-centric approach to StratCom, marked by greater cultural awareness, is therefore advocated.[80]

Conclusion

Summarising the evolution of understandings of StratCom, over time, many authors of Defence Strategic Communications have distanced themselves from an overly linear or even instrumentalist definition of StratCom seeing it as a tool or process. Some have instead embraced a holistic understanding of StratCom as a mindset, preferring an integrated approach consistent with the widely referenced definition proposed by the COE Terminology Working Group. The debate has begun to move away from a technocratic, institutional conception to broader, essentialist understandings based on the assumption that everything human beings do (or refrain from doing) communicates. While some authors promote greater ethical flexibility in ways of conducting strategic communications (in 'memetic' warfare[81]), others have increasingly deliberated on how StratCom should take account of ethical considerations. Consequently, it is time to embrace a notion of StratCom that clearly brings out its underlying values and acknowledges the agency of any community that it targets, while clarifying whether StratCom as praxis should be the exclusive preserve of liberal-democratic states.

Chapter 2

Bolt's paradigm of strategic communications

By Dr Neville Bolt

Strategic communicators inhabit a world of tensions. These act as forces which not only push and pull against each other; they define themselves against one other. Hence they are symbiotic: the one cannot exist without the other.

are collectively negotiated but personally pursued, such a field may be described as a social contract. It constrains both behaviours and aspirations according to the standards acceptable to a society at any particular time in history.
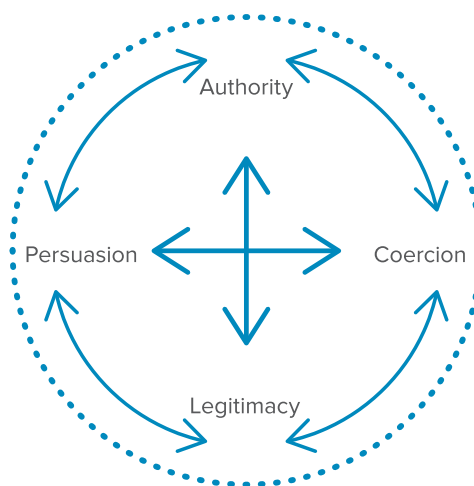
Figure 1: StratCom compass/cross-axis

At the same time, the strategic communications world is a world of ideas and ideals, principles and values. But inside it, real actions that derive from the interests and ambitions of people and states play out. And these characteristics sometimes align but are often in contradiction.

The setting in which such actions play out is the evolving understanding of mutual responsibilities and undertakings between those who govern and those whom they govern. Where individual ambitions and desires

To imagine the cross hairs of two intersecting lines or spectra helps us visualise these relationships (Figure 1). First, a horizontal line of *persuasion* and *coercion* highlights one understanding of power relations. Equally, it does not suggest that one extreme (persuasion or coercion) tries to eradicate the existence of the other. Rather, it struggles in a perpetual tension with the other. Human beings can and do use persuasion and coercion simultaneously. Their voices, faces, movements, not forgetting their silences and inaction, are often employed simultaneously. Hence by accident or design

they can send out conflicting signals. Equally a silence delivered with a smile need not be read as persuasive but can be all the more menacing.

People continually calibrate persuasion and coercion in response to events and ambitions. Persuasion is understood as the power to attract and win over another person's point of view. Coercion implies the use of force or the threat of using force to win one's way. Consequently, force can be expressed explicitly or it may remain unspoken (the so-called elephant in the room—this is attached to major economic and military powers). It may exact an effect through extreme action which offers the recipient no chance of redress. This is often known as brute force. More often, it 'promises' to apply force if the actor's will meets with excessive resistance or rejection and employs fear of pain as its psychological tool.

Meanwhile, a vertical axis intersects with the horizontal line of coercion and persuasion. This second spectrum represents *authority* and *legitimacy* contained within a power relationship of governance or command and control. Here authority is understood as holding office and benefiting from the obligations extended towards that office-holder by agreement or consensus through a system of voting, law-making, or the exercise of force. Persons in office may be granted that authority by an electorate in a democracy or by fellow members of an elite group or oligarchy. Or it may be seized in an act of force such as a military takeover (coup d'état). Set against authority is legitimacy. Rooted in a moral agreement between governed and government, the right to govern is granted through consensus. Prompting a set of mutual warranties and obligations, legitimacy is not an automatic corollary of authority; it must be earned.

Each of authority and legitimacy defines itself against the other; each cannot exist without the other. Theirs is a symbiotic relationship. Authority is inherently drawn to exceed its mandate, while what is considered legitimate will be affected by the performance of those in office. Their reward might be an extension of what in other times might be viewed

with concern. Hence accruing greater powers to a government in times of pandemic, even at the risk to civil liberties, may be condoned as exceptional measures exercised for the greater good.

Although authority may be rooted in political ideals, legitimacy is more concerned with moral understandings. Frequently this can be reduced to the idea of a 'social contract'—a set of understandings between governed and governments in any society. It will differ from one society to the next. Authority and legitimacy remain nevertheless in constant tension.

Strategic communicators and their activities project their ideas vested in their own value systems into a public space of competing values which may be complementary or conflicting. They must negotiate and navigate their actions within the cross-tensions of persuasion–coercion and authority–legitimacy. Consequently, authority may also use persuasion or force. And legitimacy may be something that persuaders favour, albeit they may also on occasions choose to use force to achieve that legitimacy if there is sufficient popular endorsement.

Such a conceptual framework can be viewed as the hidden or implicit field of relationships inside which strategic communicators act daily. It may also be seen as a field in which power relationships are engaged and fought over—a theatre where competing values and principles struggle for supremacy.

* * *

This framework of tensions is further overlaid with a process of discourse formation undertaken by political actors keen to exercise their power. Collective and individual memories are continually subject to renegotiation; they are inherently unstable. Each time we recall the past, our experience is never a mirror image of what actually occurred in practice or how we remembered it the last time we attempted to conjure up an image or association. Each new act of recall becomes a rearrangement of fragments of experience and observation collected from the past.

Society too as the repository of collective memory is replete with fragments. Constructed from the interaction of pieces of personal experience and societal accounts, new configurations of 'historical fact' are assembled in an attempt to create a new hegemonic acceptance of how and why we arrived where we

a project to shape a harmonious or common identity through the arrangement of historical fragments into a coherent story which is recounted through the repeated use of traditions, rituals, and universal tropes—in both material and discursive forms.

Memory construction

Strategic
Communications

Storytelling

Identity building
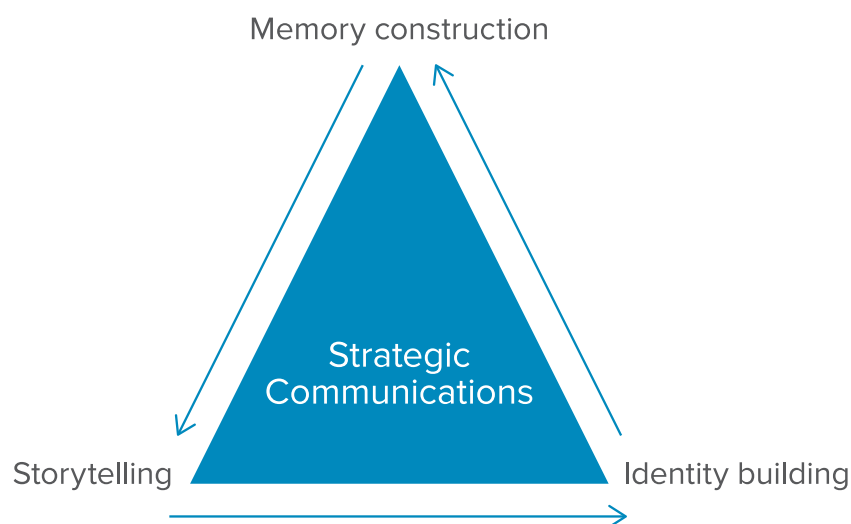
Figure 2: StratCom triangle

are today. In short, the trajectory to the here and now should form a new common sense. To persuade others that one's own version of normality is indeed the norm, and barely worth questioning, is for a political actor to be vested with significant power.

The past, present, and future may be viewed as a malleable process. Political actors seek to control the past, in order to legitimise their role in the present, and to lay claim to owning the future. Far from 'the past being another country', it is continually alive and pregnant with possibility. Hence this becomes

Consequently, reassembling the past—or in some cases preserving the past—through reordered fragments that, once arranged, tell a persuasive and common story helps to reinforce an identity which most in society will be encouraged to adopt (Figure 2).

Discourses we shape amid the constant tensions of the persuasion–coercion axis that further intersects in a set of pulls and pushes with tensions contained within the authority–legitimacy axis create a context in which to consider strategic communications and its storytelling ambitions.

Chapter 3
Definitions explained

By Dr Leonie Haiden and Dr Jente Althuis

In 2019 the Terminology Working Group of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence defined strategic communications as follows:

strategic communications, n.: a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment.[82]

As of 2022, strategic communications is conceived as a normative project, and as such its theorists and practitioners recognise certain principles that underpin their activities:

- #1 StratCom affirms the right of the individual to **choose** between competing ideas or **reject** them.
- #2 StratCom affirms a need for **transparency** and the right of individuals to hold those who practise StratCom to be **held to account**.
- #3 StratCom affirms the right of the individual to **free speech**.

Why are we talking about this now?

The debate on who does and does not practise 'strategic communications' has accompanied the subject as a distinct concept since it first entered wider circulation in the early 2000s, particularly following its emergence in United Nations reports (1997),[83] NATO documents (2007),[84] and US government statements on StratCom (2009).[85] Yet engagement with this question has been minimal to date. It is now timely to suggest further differentiation, and thus for this purpose how normative questions might be answered. This has been prompted by conversations around values that have been foregrounded once again in Western discourse following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. While greater reference to values has appeared in mainstream public discourses, these have centred on themes such as Western democracy, liberalism, and multilateralism,[86] and less so specifically directed at the field of strategic communications. By definition, StratCom is grounded in a set of values and interests. But which and whose? And what does this imply for putting those principles into practice? How would an expanded definition of StratCom further differentiate it from other forms of communication?

Value-based communications for the rules-based international order of the twenty-first century

StratCom is an essential contribution to policy implementation, if not its *sine qua non*, in the twenty-first century. It is a mindset, a way of thinking about the relationships between society, politics, and communications that endeavours to navigate the complexity of today's information space. At the same time, it negotiates between new developments in communications technologies and ways of using them, and ethical stances on the relationship between governed and governing, persuasion and coercion, and authority and legitimacy.

Global information and media systems have purposefully and dramatically changed over the past fifty years. This is a consequence of mutually reinforcing processes where technological innovation and consumer adoption reinforced and accelerated development in often unforeseen ways. As much as technology companies drive their innovations to market, how they are adopted, and which succeed while others fail, is less than predictable. At the same time, government support, often entailing direct investment or purchase, and the nature of business regulatory climates navigated by capital investors have produced a complex media environment. As communications technologies advanced with great rapidity during the so-called microchip revolution with its shift from analogue to digital, so too have media organisations transformed the way they understand content production and distribution. It is noteworthy that functions as commonplace today as the 'like' button on Facebook and the 'retweet' on Twitter were only introduced in 2009, auguring a new era of virality and algorithmic data analysis.[87] In short, this is a story of technological innovation but also of human agency.

Widespread access to the internet, the advent of social media, and portable smartphone technology have changed the availability of devices, the cost of airtime, and consequently the distribution, consumption, availability, and analysis of information. On the surface, siloed national communications environments guarded by gatekeepers and mainly engaged in one-to-many communications seem to belong to the past. Today, almost all consumers enjoy access to a global network of information sources, and the means at our fingertips to communicate with potentially millions of other users.

This recent phase in technology-enabled human communication was widely predicted to lead to a new era of democratisation by connecting people around the world and making the distribution of and access to information cheaper, simpler, and faster, if set up and maintained in the fashion as conceived in the Unites States at the end of the last century. But as repeated cases of election interference, disinformation campaigns, and online radicalisation have come to light, worries have grown about the effects these mediums have unleashed.[88] If anything, these events have revealed how modern communications technologies did not inevitably lead towards democracy and truth-telling.

Today the information space is considered another dimension of a constant strategic struggle between people and powers—a battleground for an arsenal of hybrid threats. The language of war and conflict has found its way into the space of communications over centuries. Today liberal democracies talk of launching counter-attacks and counter-narratives against information campaigns from their adversaries. Their communications pit democracy against autocracy, freedom against repression. But what does it mean to uphold democratic values in this information space? Public institutions struggle to verify evidence-based reporting in an accelerated information environment, while malign actors have no scruples in taking

advantage of these vulnerabilities before using whatever means available to exert their influence. These questions are well rehearsed in policy circles. Yet the sheer speed of political events covered at both domestic and international levels has allowed participants little time to address them.

Strategic communications interrogates these questions directly because of the nature of being grounded in core values and principles central to the propositions it seeks to project. And while characteristics of the information environment make the communicator's job more difficult, eliminating complexity and fluidity—even if it were possible—would further lead to the creation of a restrictive and repressive environment. As the following section explains, it is this understanding that sets StratCom apart from other forms of communication.

The principles of StratCom and why they matter

In principle, different individuals and political groupings (parties, governments, and institutions) may share similar sets of basic values. But when faced with the actual circumstances of their daily lives, they will make a choice over which values to prioritise. The invasion of Ukraine has made it more difficult to choose between competing priorities of energy security, environmental impact, and human rights violations.

This also applies to the techniques chosen to communicate. In times of escalating crisis or in war, more coercive means become part of asserting a nation's influence in words as in deeds, and thus within a strategic communicator's repertoire. That is not a contradiction: 'Coercive diplomacy [...] remains close to our understanding of diplomacy.'[89] And credibility must be protected, sometimes at a very high price. The United Kingdom in 1982 lost more than 250 military personnel in recapturing the Falkland Islands from Argentina. The military junta in Buenos Aires had decided to grab the long-claimed islands off its South Atlantic coast in order to boost its waning domestic popularity. The British government under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher responded directly to the challenge to the country's international credibility by sending a naval task force to retake the islands.[90] 'It is about appreciating that the perception of truth determines what is believed—right or wrong—and the consequent relationship between governments' hard won credibility and their legitimacy.'[91]

This does mean that StratCom operates inside a moral code which defines what is right and wrong, along the ethical lines established in the underlying concepts of a *populus* steeped in a culture and history that StratCom seeks to protect and reinforce.[92] The extended definition put forward in this publication underpins that strategic communications will not systematically define a narrow concept of individuals' freedom of choice and expression, since that would not uphold the principle of strategic communicators' accountability.

This sounds quite abstract, so let us consider the case of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. While the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq was used by US officials to justify the invasion, it later became clear that these claims were fabricated and based on lies and exaggeration.[93] There was a significant lack of transparency in 2003—the public did not know all the facts. Those sworn in to positions of power in liberal democracies in the West at that time had in some cases chosen illegitimate and sometimes illegal means in their attempts to defend freedom and the rule of law. This approach of trading long-term credibility for short-term strategic advantage led to particular narrative collapse and thus to core narrative damage. Gradually, for the sake of redemption and through journalistic effort, the truth came out. Journalists responded by holding those responsible politically to account, albeit with little or no sanction beyond public

opprobrium. Amends must yet be made to heal the credibility breach.

Meanwhile, the situation in Russia today is very different. President Putin uses blatant lies to justify his invasion of Ukraine. But he is simultaneously shutting down all public debate and independent media who might question this decision. Assessing these acts against the principles of StratCom outlined above, none of them are upheld: the Kremlin is not allowing the existence of competing ideas, freedom of speech is almost completely suppressed, and there are few if any mechanisms through which the Kremlin can be held accountable by the Russian population.

Some have listed StratCom in the same category as propaganda, message control, or manipulation. The definition we propose here seeks to clearly distinguish StratCom from these forms of communication. As outlined above, it is impossible to do this by looking purely at the 'toolbox' used by communicators. Many of these tools have been used by both strategic communicators and propagandists, democrats and autocrats alike.

But there is, and should be, a difference in the mindsets undergirding these actors' decisions as to what and how something is communicated. Human beings are prone to want their way of looking at the world and their interpretations to be the dominant one. But those who are doing strategic communications know that they are communicating into a contested environment in which a plurality of competing ideas exists. Individuals have the power to resist and disagree with what they are being told.

Why principles?

Strategic communications inhabits for some a welcome and for others an uncomfortable ambiguity. Campaign-hardened practitioners who are outcome driven might embrace ignorant bliss to avoid the need to explain the why, what, and how of being a strategic communicator.

But standards are inherent in making choices as communicators. What information should they include or exclude from their communications—whether explicitly stated or not? How do communicators think about their audiences? To what extent do communicators actually wish to reveal to target audiences their ways and means to shape opinions? What is a viable justification for playing on emotions, fears, and desires of audiences to change the way they think and behave?

So certain values underpin a StratCom standard or a set of StratCom principles, informing choices to be made. These have to be consistent with concepts of society where people can express themselves freely, can choose between competing ideas, and have the ability to hold those in power accountable.

Upholding freedom of speech cannot be absolute. Freedom is always the freedom of the other. Hence Western democracies watch over the use of free speech, legally and socially, maintaining checks and balances between stakeholders in public discourses. Especially when individual freedoms are exploited to promote removing these same freedoms, guiding principles are not met. While open societies in dialogue with themselves perform a continual assessment and balancing act while adapting ideas and values, their basic orientation remains constant.

Mindset, not a checklist or manual, shapes the intention of the actor, and is central to upholding the principles and values of StratCom. This becomes the starting point and trajectory of 'doing StratCom'. An actor with a principled StratCom mindset—based on a specific way of understanding society and communications—and working in a complex environment must not resemble a propagandist. *Successful StratCom* is credible StratCom. Hence it must be principled StratCom.

Calibrating persuasion and coercion

Long before he became German chancellor, Olaf Scholz declared: 'I am a liberal, but not stupid.'[94] At the time, as minister of the interior for the German city-state of Hamburg *(Innensenator)*, he underlined the view that state repression against criminals protects citizens' freedom, preserving the perception of security which in turn opens up a truly public space in a liberal *res publica*.

It was, and constantly is, in both strategic and tactical senses, a question of a polity's credibility: can it hold foreign and domestic enemies in check, especially when they are engaged in 'the totalitarian revolt against civilization', which according to Karl Popper is as old as democratic societies themselves?[95]

At the same time as Popper felt compelled to put pen to paper on the subject, World War II was being fought over that very challenge. Thus, as already highlighted, the calibration of means suitable for protecting and enforcing an ethical framework for a liberal order is a constant feature of what strategic communications is all about. Namely, why are we compelled to act, when, and to what end? Furthermore, what are the instruments at our disposal, and how should we use them in pursuit of our aims, while aligning them with our norms and values that protect our credibility? And indeed, to what effect? All instruments of statecraft should be used wisely.

In the accelerated world of today, there is no benefit in pre-emptive, self-restrictive obedience to so-called 'realities', more often than not themselves partisan or interest-driven constructs set to confuse and coerce. Not moralistic sententiousness but ethically grounded pragmatism combined with a long-term perspective is what strategic communications must bring to the table whenever the next totalitarian revolt has to be quelled. That time might be now.

Chapter 4

Terms through a strategic communications lens

By Dr Leonie Haiden and Dr Jente Althuis

The relationship between strategic communications and values does not only concern how we define StratCom itself. The articulation of values has also been a central part of how actors have shaped and shifted discourses in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

When actors use certain terms and concepts—defending Western values, protecting our freedom, fighting an existential war, to name but a few—they aim to shape how we understand the events going on around us, and how we react to them. But in doing so they also shape and sometimes (re)define the terms themselves. It is worth considering the origins of some of these terms, and setting out how and why they have recently been used and contested by different actors.

The discussion below is by no means exhaustive. It addresses the most relevant and contested terms that have regained currency in discourse surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

The status of the debate is depicted below, rather than any fresh definition of the terms selected. Terms have already been extensively conceptualised during a rich history that has seen lively academic debate. Instead of redefining them here, better to show how contested some are, and contextualise how they are used today.

Existential war, *n.*: A war that threatens the survival of an entire society, or nation

In his speech to the US Congress on 16 March 2022, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine stated: 'Now the fate of our state is being decided. The fate of our people.'[96] But, according to Zelenskyy, the outcome of the war is crucial even beyond his home country, since Ukrainians 'are fighting for the values of Europe and the world, sacrificing [their] lives in the name of the Future'.[97] Zelenskyy positions the defeat of Russia in Ukraine as essential to the survival of the Ukrainian nation and the West as a whole.

The term 'existential' relates to existence. Bringing it back to its essence, it would refer to our ability to be, or remain, alive. An existential war thus implies that the survival of an entire society—a collective of individuals—is being threatened. But it does not necessarily refer to only the physical survival of the individuals who make up a society; it might also refer to their collective way of life.[98]

Not only has President Zelenskyy been arguing that his nation is facing an existential threat; so too has President Putin. Putin stated in September 2022 that 'The West is seeking to weaken, divide and finally destroy this country [Russia]', implying that his intervention in Ukraine was crucial to the territorial integrity and future of Russia.[99] Thus he justifies his actions to the Russian people as a requirement

for the nation to survive, most recently in his announcement of a partial mobilisation, the first since World War II.[100]

For many the idea of an existential war is difficult to imagine. A nuclear war would be what comes closest to grasping one nation being catastrophically defeated, and destroyed, by another. And what is considered existential to one society—an unnegotiable requirement for survival—is not the same for another. No rigid boundaries can be drawn around the definition of this term.

The term has been used, and contested, extensively by actors in other conflicts, for example, by Israel, the Islamic State,[101] and Armenia in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Its use today is changing within a broadening understanding of security. Most recently, climate change has been referred to as an 'existential threat to humanity'[102] by those elevating its urgency above what is merely considered 'existential'.

This raises the question: what exactly are we protecting—what is existential to us? President Zelenskyy declared that what needs to be protected is: 'Democracy, independence, freedom and care for everyone. Everyone who works diligently. Who lives honestly. Who respects the law.'[103] Or, in the words of the European Council, Russia has been 'wilfully undermining the rules-based international order'.[104]

Rules-based international order, *n.*

Just as our national policy in internal affairs has been based upon a decent respect for the rights and the dignity of all our fellow men within our gates, so our national policy in foreign affairs has been based on a decent respect for the rights and the dignity of all nations, large and small. And the justice of morality must and will win in the end.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, State of the Union Address, 6 January 1941[105]

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the rules-based (international) order has been invoked with renewed frequency in political and media discourses.[106] In keeping with how the phrase has moved to the centre of foreign policy discourse, at the 77th UN General Assembly in September 2022, President Biden, President Macron, and Chancellor Scholz, among many other leaders, underlined the need to uphold and reinforce the rules-based international order.[107]

At the same time, commentators and academics have questioned whether such an order even exists. They have criticised the phrase for being overused and vacuous,[108] and have suggested the Russian disregard for Ukraine's territorial integrity is proof that such an order is a myth rather than a fact of international relations.[109] This is not new. Since the end of the Cold War there have been continuous discussions about what the post-Cold War and then the post-9/11 world order is—from Francis Fukuyama's 'liberal moment',[110] to Kenneth Waltz's emerging multipolarity,[111] to Benjamin Barber's 'Jihad versus McWorld',[112] and to Anne-Marie Slaughter's 'New World Order'.[113] More recently there has been talk that the world is no longer 'in order' but that we have entered an 'age of uncertainty' or an 'era of catastrophic risk'.[114]

In its simplest form, an 'order' in international relations is a system of organised institutions to help govern and regulate interactions among states.[115] Orders can be made up of regional and global institutions, and are usually designed and maintained by great powers.

The rules-based international order (liberal international order) originated in the violent struggle of the 1930s and 1940s between democratic nations and 'the new order of tyranny'[116] pursued by Nazi Germany and Japan in World War II. It was driven by the conviction that the horrors experienced during and after two world wars, engineered famine, a rise of fascism and communism, and the Holocaust should never be repeated.[117]

it comes to economic relations, the rules-based international order advances an interconnected and free-market world economy. In terms of governance, it defends and promotes human rights and democratic values.[118]

We can also distinguish between three entities that uphold this order: sets of rules laid out in the UN Charter and international treaties which strive to ensure peace and cooperation

Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms': foundations for the rules-based international order

US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated in his 1941 State of the Union Address to US Congress (the so-called 'Four Freedoms Speech'):

'In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is **freedom of speech and expression**—everywhere in the world.

The second is **freedom** of every person **to worship** God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

The third is **freedom from want**, which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

The fourth is **freedom from fear**, which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbour—anywhere in the world.

That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is **a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation.** That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called new order of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb.'

These 'Four Freedoms' directly influenced the guiding principles for a post-World War II global order, as stipulated by Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. This in turn led the way for the United Nations Charter of 26 June 1945.

Source: Harvey J. Kaye, *The Fight for the Four Freedoms: What Made FDR and the Greatest Generation Truly Grea*t (New York, 2014), emphasis added.

The rules-based international order is based on a set of rules and norms that seeks to ensure global peace and prosperity. It broadly applies to three areas: global security, the economy, and governance. Concerning global security, state sovereignty and territorial integrity are to be preserved. The order also places limits on the use of military force and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. When

between states; formal bodies, such as the UN, the Bretton Woods institutions, or NATO, which offer forums for discussion and settling of disputes; and powerful democratic states and alliances such as the US or the European Union (EU).[119]

The fact that the order's stewardship has been in the hands of the United States and

that the US and Europe have embedded their values and interests within the code of this order are recurring points of critique. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 is taken in particular as an example of the US flouting the very same rules it claims to defend and enforce, especially by countries in the Global South. This critique ties into one of the key dilemmas for defenders of the 'liberal world order': the tension between universalist ambitions of liberalism and the use of force. Michael Howard discussed this in his *War and the Liberal Conscience* (1978), where he distinguished three approaches to the dilemma. 'Classical liberals' are described as being descendants of Tom Paine and Jeremy Bentham, who believe that there can be peace if all nations cooperate under the banner of the United Nations. US Presidents Jimmy Carter or Barack Obama would be examples of these.

Then there is the 'realist' camp, consistent with Henry Kissinger, who believe that peace is best maintained by preserving the existing balance between powers, no matter what political system or ideology they espouse. Finally, Howard identified a school of 'muscular liberalism' ('neo-conservatives') who believe that great powers like the United States should use their military force to fight the enemies of the free world and not have scruples as to the methods used or allies chosen.[120]

It should not be assumed that renewed invocation of the 'rules-based international order' means that it has necessarily been strengthened. Established and emerging powers are vying to preserve and sometimes reform it.[121] Yet, states such as Russia and China seek to revise and redesign the international order. And countries in the Global South that feel their voices have not been included are calling for a democratisation of the international order and the institutions underpinning it. These requests for reform were voiced at the 77th UN General Assembly and included calls for far-reaching reforms of the international system, as well as an expansion of the permanent members of the UN Security Council.[122]

Democracy, *n*., vs. autocracy, *n*.

In promoting human rights and democratic values, the rules-based international order connects interactions between states with the system of governance within states. In his 2022 State of the Union Address, President Biden declared that the world finds itself in 'the battle between democracies and autocracies'.[123] He continued by stating that 'democracies are rising to the moment and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security'.[124] Here he used the term 'democracy' to describe not just a system of government but one that includes its inherent values, most importantly 'freedom'. In doing so he sees Russia—an autocracy—as threatening democracy and thereby the free world.

The term democracy derives from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power), thus referring to the power of the people. In essence, it refers to the 'self-government of equals',[125] indicating both a system of government and the democratic ideals that it seeks to uphold.

As a form of government, democracy describes a system in which the people choose who gets to rule, or in some cases deliberate legislation themselves—a direct democracy. But there is a large variety of ways in which democracy can be organised. Today we mostly speak of 'liberal democracies' which are characterised by elections, a separation of powers, the rule of law, a market economy, and the equal protection of rights and freedoms (human, civil, and political). There is no single 'most democratic' model of political decision-making. Debates regarding the distribution of economic resources,[126] suffrage, and equal representation continue to evolve in an ever-changing and increasingly complex world.

If it is not a specific form of rule, then it must be democratic ideals that unite democracies against autocracies. However, even these ideals are contested in nations that consider themselves democratic. The trade-off between maintaining control over individuals' lives (liberty and autonomy) and accepting the legislation of a government with majority support (political equality) remains a constant point of tension.

As an idea in action, Biden has posited democracy against autocracy, with the latter in his eyes threatening those values captured in this idea. 'Autocracy' is derived from the Greek terms *autos* (self) and *kratos* (power), referring to authority vested in the hands of a single person. Those who hold absolute power are not subject to scrutiny by the people and cannot be held accountable for their acts. They undermine the core values of democratic governance. In an autocratic system of governance it becomes more difficult to uphold the core principles—values—of strategic communications.

The democracy–autocracy debate continues. If, as President Biden argues, there is indeed a new-found unity and purpose among democracies, then increased cooperation between states might be expected.[127] Although this has been prominent among democracies taking a stance against Russia's intervention in Ukraine, at the same time it raises questions. What does 'defending democracy' mean for cooperating with nations not considered democratic—condemning Russia in the United Nations? Does trade with states that hold different values undermine democracies' values? Or could pressure on energy security trump the promotion of human rights? In clarifying our understanding of these debates, it is essential to remind ourselves of the origins and definitions of the terms we use.

Just war, *n.*, vs. just peace, *n.*

When visiting Washington, DC, to meet President Biden at the White House on 21 December 2022, President Zelenskyy said that he found the idea of a *'just peace'* hard to imagine for Ukrainian parents who had lost their children during Russia's invasion of their country: 'I don't know what just peace is. It's a very philosophical description. If there is a just war, I don't know.'[128] President Biden had referred to a *'just peace'* in his statement opening the press conference both leaders shared.[129]

In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Western governments supporting Ukraine's defence refer to a just peace when underlining what Zelenskyy had established as the baseline: namely, the end to hostilities only without compromises on Ukrainian territorial integrity or sovereignty.

Just peace: conceptual approaches

Embedded in liberal ideas of peace, modern peace studies includes different normative categories like justice, rights, and equity.

In essence, concepts of just peace can augment notions of just war, if Thomas Aquinas's dictum of a just war serving the attainment of a just peace is applied. Similarly, thinkers on just peace promote non-violent means of conflict resolution to supplant just war concepts.[1]

Regardless, *jus ad bellum* (just war) remains the positive or negative reference point for *jus post bellum* (just peace). Therefore, if *jus ad bellum* criteria leading to war are not met, finding ways to establish post-war justice and conflict resolution can be assessed as even more crucial.[2]

Equally, a concept closely linked to *just peace*, namely *peacebuilding*, had developed by the end of the twentieth century insofar as it transcended the reining in of violence. Conflict transformation was to be brought about through social change, institutional and socio-economic reform entailing economic liberalisation, the rule of law, and consequently institutionalised accountability. In 1992 this liberal peacebuilding paradigm would manifest itself in the UN Agenda for Peace.[3]

Experience in applying the liberal paradigm and consideration of a post-war/post-conflict justice, implied by the overarching concept of *jus post bellum*, gave impetus to the transitional justice concept.[4] While this concept in part relies on 'techniques of memorialization rituals of truth telling and reparation of victims',[5] serving reconciliation as the most important aspect of a peace process, sanctioning wrongdoing by legal punishment is also part and parcel of this approach as a means of acknowledgement and forgiveness.[6]

Intersubjective approaches go beyond universal liberal norms. They address even deeper, more particular and individual dispositions as root causes of conflict. Hence they must be acknowledged or even resolved for the sake of just peace. Assuming that inter- and intra-societal conflict is most often nested in subjective perceptions of individual victimhood and conflicting narratives, this concept seeks to recognise these factors, driving individual behaviour as a starting point for reconciliation.[7]

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[3] Carsten Stahn and Jens Iverson (eds), *Just Peace after Conflict: Jus Post Bellum and the Justice of Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2020): 8.
[4] Eli S. McCarthy (ed.), *Just Peace Ethic Primer: Building Sustainable Peace and Breaking Cycles of Violence* (Georgetown University Press, 2020): 44.
[5] Stahn and Iverson, *Just Peace after Conflict*, 10.
[6] McCarthy, *Just Peace Ethic Primer*, 44.
[7] Stahn and Iverson, *Just Peace after Conflict*, 11.

Here, Ukraine rejects any notion of a dictated peace imposed on it by external actors, even though that conflict is perceived as bringing the world closer to a nuclear confrontation between Russia and the US than any crisis before. In this particular political discourse, which is also a competition over interpretative primacy, nuances of peace are defined, while peace itself, in short, is the political condition opposite to war. On the other hand, war is politically motivated and represents the organised application of destructive force by a single or collective actors to impose their will on other groups or entities.

The West German chancellor Willy Brandt is said to have declared in 1981: 'Peace is not everything, but everything is nothing without peace.'[130] Through him spoke a generation that had tried to rebuild a stable, peaceful Europe from the devastation of World War I, the following decades of chaos, and the subsequent World War II, albeit at the price of accepting that a large part of Europe would remain under Soviet authoritarian rule for more than forty years. In the same period, mutually assured destruction between the nuclear powers and the continuity of interstate conventional industrial warfare led to stalemate. It rendered open warfare between nations and alliances impossible, while confrontation persisted between the superpowers, the USA and the USSR, which fostered a nuance of warfare, the so-called Cold War.

War and peace are defined in opposition to one another. But the Cold War period proved that the world could be caught in an in-between condition, in which a confrontational power struggle among nations possessing historically unparalleled warfighting potential had to be sublimated into war by proxy, whether through economic and cultural contest, or by taking sides in domestic power struggles in countries over which they competed for influence. Protracted conflicts ensued, in which it was not so much success on the battlefield as sustaining the will to fight among a nation's or group's political support base that decided which party prevailed. Political support bases, for whatever cause, need a compelling

justification and perspective (commonly: a narrative) to invest 'blood and treasure' in a violent confrontation in the first place. This was even more so the case in the interconnected world of the second half of the twentieth century, in which people could be made aware which wars were being waged and how in their name on the television evening news.

What is a *'just war'*? A debate formerly confined to religious scholars since the inception of monotheism—among Christians, Augustine of Hippo, Gratian, and St Thomas Aquinas[131]—became a public one. From antiquity to the Middle Ages, underlying it was the driving question: how does war win or not win divine blessing? In modern times a higher awareness of individual human needs and desires of self-fulfilment sparked international deliberations on what conditions might establish a just peace. The absence of open confrontation did not seem to be the sole criterion for peace in times of cold, but nevertheless total, war between ideologically defined blocks of nations on the world stage.

Consequently, after the Cold War had ended and globalisation endured, seemingly rendering the diminution of nation-state power a **sine qua non**, a shift away from state towards human security was clearly marked by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Report 1994, subtitled New Dimensions of Human Security.*[132] Consistent with notions of global governance oriented towards asserting and protecting universal human rights, Western scholars like Mary Kaldor went as far as to proclaim the use of military force as legitimate only if used in ways similar to domestic law enforcement, since 'the rights of individuals supersede the rights of states and [...] therefore, international law that applies to individuals overrides the laws of war. In other words, **jus in pace** should not be suspended in wartime in favour of **jus ad bellum or jus in bello**.'[133]

Just war (or, better, just use of military force), therefore, became only viable in the service of preserving or establishing a just peace, defined by supposedly universally established

and globally binding liberal standards of individual rights and well-being. This paradigm served well to legitimate a plethora of humanitarian military interventions from the end of the Cold War, from Somalia to the Balkans. Even after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, the ensuing Global War on Terror largely employed the 'establishing a just peace' motive to legitimise regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, as well as to intervene in Syria.

As Western cohesion waned among allies and partners, and within their respective domestic political spheres, it triggered revisionist powers like China and Russia to pursue more aggressively their aims and objectives to overcome a world order. This was, as they saw it, dominated by liberal ideas propped up by American might. Hence the paradigm of just war as a manifestation of state security dwarfing individual needs has returned. Russian leader Vladimir Putin employs visions of a Russian national mission steeped in history, justifying not only brutal invasion and occupation of neighbouring states, but demanding his population sacrifice its own life and limb and those of its offspring for that collective purpose. This constitutes only the thinnest of veils for a nihilist concept of raw power where leaders profess to rule in the name of the divine—as in Saudi Arabia or Iran, where they ceased to conceal their total disregard for their own or foreign subjects. Equally, the communist autocrats, posing as the 'revolutionary avant-garde' allegedly called upon by history to rule with unchecked powers over the Chinese people, ask it to be ready to sacrifice everything for state glory and security.

While counterintuitive, it seems fitting that President Zelenskyy, in his address to both US Houses of Congress on 22 December 2022,[134] not only put his people's fight against the Russian invasion into the wider context of a global struggle of freedom versus autocracy, invoking the Allies' fight against Nazi Germany in the 1940s. He also established a fitting contemporary idea of a ***just war***. In other words, the besieged Ukrainians are sacrificing everything for our common liberal values, and thus deserve our support in pursuit of a *just peace*—in the sense that only restoring justice by and for the oppressed is a legitimate outcome for Ukraine and for the free world as a whole. The people of Ukraine and many international volunteers are ready and willing to put their lives on the line for this aim.

Expansion, *n.*, vs. enlargement, *n.*

When NATO was set up in 1949, the twelve founding members agreed on the following process by which additional members could join the Alliance:

> *The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty. Any State so invited may become a Party to the Treaty by depositing its instrument of accession with the Government of the United States of America. The Government of the United States of America will inform each of the Parties of the deposit of each such instrument of accession.*

The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington, DC, 4 April 1949, Article 10

Greece, Türkiye, Germany, and Spain were subsequently invited and were the only additional nations to join NATO until 1989. In that year, the Cold War ended.

In her book *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate,*[135] Mary E. Sarotte sees the post-Cold War struggle over Europe's future begin with the alleged agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1990 over the consequences for former Warsaw Pact states of a reunited Germany becoming a NATO member, including that NATO membership would be out of the question for them. But the implosion of the Soviet sphere of influence, and of the USSR itself, made any agreement—if such ever existed—void.

Thus, in the three decades following the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989, NATO extended its membership considerably to more than thirty nations, including the former Soviet republics Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. At the same time, a controversial discourse between voices from the Russian Federation (Russian President Boris Yeltsin called NATO plans for taking on new members illegal as early as 1993)[136] and representatives from NATO questioned NATO's welcome to new nations as 'expansion' and to Russia's detriment. Also criticised were nations already in or aspiring to enter the Alliance; those were prone to frame this process as 'NATO enlargement'.

These different frames, expansion and enlargement, stand for different narratives partially explaining the deterioration of the erstwhile good rapport which had existed between Washington and Moscow at least at the beginning of the 1990s. But they were also symptoms of the decline or even abolition of the post-Cold War world order, signified by the return of Great Power competition. Revisionist framing by Russia—calling NATO expansionist—employs the inherent active connotation of the word 'expansion', while 'enlargement', preferred in NATO's and its member nations' communications, implies that external causes triggered or drove the extension.

For Russia, the 'expansionist' frame for NATO sits neatly in a grand narrative of self-victimisation, whereby the Russian Federation is encircled by foes who plot and scheme to throw Russia back into the gutter where it found itself following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Evidently, this was brought about by the same set of historical enemies, foreign and domestic. But Russia having been betrayed once more by the United States, breaking an alleged promise not to extend NATO or the EU further east beyond German territory, is a frame embraced not only by the Russian people. In many European states, EU and NATO members alike, parts of civil society, academia, media, and the political spectrum also promoted, and still promote, caution over NATO welcoming states once of the Warsaw Pact, or even of the Soviet Union. This is aimed at avoiding Western provocation of Russia by impeding the Russian Federation's allegedly highly legitimate security interests, as prominent critic of NATO enlargement John Mearsheimer pointed out.[137]

The premise was that Russia under Gorbachev had enabled the peaceful end to the Cold War. The West should consequently be grateful and not too greedy. Besides, who needed a military alliance or institutionalised, supranational, political integration after Fukuyama's 'end of history' anyway—certainly, when the world was about to develop beyond the confines of national historical interests or overcome political ideologies towards a globally liberal society, cherishing individual pursuits of happiness by transnational economic networking and competition. Thus, in the name of a peaceful multilateral global order, a postmodern, post-national, liberal mindset expressed itself in mostly elite Western discourses by advocating the honouring of Russia's unilaterally expressed concerns around NATO expansion. Consistent with that perspective, German public intellectuals like Professor Julian Nida-Rümelin (former federal state secretary for culture) see the West sanctioning Russia over the Ukraine war as a risk of triggering *Deglobalisierung*.[138]

The frame of NATO enlargement encapsulates the prevalence of pull-factors created by nations aspiring to join the Alliance—the subject of bilateral and trilateral consultations between former Warsaw Pact states and Western capitals soon after German reunification. While interest was considerable in Prague, Warsaw, and Budapest to get on the 'right side' of the line of confrontation, Western reactions were mostly lukewarm. Many leaders in Washington were enjoying unprecedented access and influence in Moscow in the early 1990s. They were still accustomed to see the Kremlin as the decisive voice with which to deal in matters of global security, a legacy of bipolar Cold War days.

Under US President Bill Clinton that changed, not least because some nations had strong advocates in US society, among those whose ancestors had migrated from these countries. For Clinton, economic and strategic interests were of relevance, since fostering stability through integration seemed advantageous. But compared to nations wanting to join precisely because of Russia, Clinton and his allies and partners welcomed Russia

becoming more assertive by brutally suppressing further secession of parts of the Russian Federation (Chechnya), while gaining a greater share of the global energy market. The West might not have condoned these methods, but it happily accepted the results by which Kremlin leader Boris Yeltsin and his successor Vladimir Putin stabilised Russia in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The arrangement whereby Russia integrated into the global economy while accepting NATO extending its membership—the West cared little for the Russian state growing more authoritarian under Putin—presented a historic opportunity to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in 1999, and the Baltic States, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania in 2004. Namely, to join NATO.

Since Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, openly marking Russia's transition from a cooperative to a revisionist stance towards the West, framing NATO expansion has worked equally well for Russia with domestic audiences and some receptive Western audiences. The West's frame of NATO enlargement, which recognises the respective nationalist urge of nations to join NATO as the driving factor, is still not unequivocally accepted by all Western domestic actors and audiences. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has been repeatedly and consistently justified to this day by Vladimir Putin as Russia's necessary reaction to NATO's growth after 1991—since 'Nato's acceptance of former Soviet allies as members threatens its security'.[139] Consequently, these competing frames still foster controversial debates, at least in Germany, between groups promoting peace negotiations—regardless of the costs for Ukraine, since NATO had allegedly provoked Russia by its apparent drive for expansion—and those parts of the public who see NATO enlargement as a proven way to make countries in Russia's neighbourhood safer.

Thus, while they are synonyms, the nuances of enlargement versus expansion still have potency in Western discourses.

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31 Ibid., 39. See also: NATO, Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration, 4 April 2009.

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34 Ibid., 54. MC: Military Committee.

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