

Strategic Communication Considerations for the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander

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Strategic communication has been a hotly debated topic over the last decade. What is it? Who is in charge? How do you measure its impact? What is the role of the military commander? Can strategic communication help accomplish operational objectives? Over the past decade military leaders such as Admirals Mullen and Stavridis and Generals Mattis and McChrystal have urged military professionals to better understand the challenges of conducting operations in the contemporary information environment so that they can set conditions for success. This article provides recommendations for the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC) and the supporting Maritime Operations Center (MOC) staff to consider as they grapple with strategic communication issues.

The Evolution of Strategic Communication: Competing in the Information Environment

Strategic communication gained prominence post-9/11 as the Bush administration assessed that Al Qaida's rhetoric was winning the hearts and minds of key Muslim audiences. The National Security Council promoted a "whole of government" approach to improve U. S. Government (USG) communications efforts, established the position of "Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication" and formed a standing committee to ensure a more coherent, consistent interagency message. The State Department took the lead when Karen Hughes became the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in 2005 and produced the National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication in 2007. For its part, the Department of Defense (DoD) established a "Strategic Communication Roadmap" as part of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), combatant commanders established "Strategic Communication Directorates," planning guidance was amended to include an OPLAN annex dedicated to Strategic Communication, and military periodicals published articles highlighting strategic communication best practices.

However, despite efforts to improve the military's role in strategic communication, the term "strategic communication" was not well defined, the concept was not widely adopted by leaders in the field, and supporting activities were not effectively integrated into military operations. The uneven application of strategic communication during military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in a loss of support from key allies and international publics. On some military staffs, strategic communication was seen as the central feature of military operations while on other staffs, the "SC Working Group" was merely a poorly attended meeting on a battle rhythm schedule. Furthermore, some in Congress openly questioned the appropriateness of DoD's active participation in strategic communication and accused the military over stepping legal bounds.

Given this complexity and controversy, why does DoD continue to consider strategic communication an important element of military operations? The primary reason is that the information environment has become an increasingly critical aspect of the overall operational environment. Indeed, the relationship between the military operational environment and the information environment was discussed in detail in the 2006 QDR. As the *Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication* explained, “Changes in the global information environment require the DoD, in conjunction with other USG agencies, to implement more deliberate and well-developed strategic communication processes...The QDR recommendations support the efforts led by the DoS to improve the integration of information as an element of national power. DoD must contribute to this effort by strengthening Strategic Communication processes in its organizational culture.”

Military success can be either directly aided or challenged by activities in the information environment. Lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan suggest that commanders believed that while U.S. forces often won tactical victories on the conventional battlefield, the adversary was able to prevail in the information environment. Incidents related to torture, unintended civilian deaths, and actions that were construed as disrespectful toward Muslim culture created a chasm between the impact of these events and the intended operational or strategic objectives. This mismatch between strategic policy objectives and military tactical actions was coined the “say-do” gap and is a term still used today. The “say-do” gap directly and significantly affects the operational level of war (OLW). The OLW commander defines tasks for subordinates that are designed to set desired conditions thus ensuring that tactical actions achieve operational objectives that nest within strategic objectives. Focusing on the relationship between the operational environment and the information environment and recognizing the risk to mission that a “say-do” gap entails is an important part of the OLW strategic communication process.

Strategic Communication is a Process

Admiral Mullen often asserted that strategic communication is a process. “Rather than trying to capture all the communication underneath it [strategic communication], we should use the term to describe the process by which we integrate and coordinate. To put it simply, we need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and more about what our actions communicate.”¹ Given this definition, strategic communication includes actions such as the conduct of traditional military operations, complemented by information-related activities, such as key leader engagement (KLE), civil-military operations (CMO), public affairs (PA), and information operations (IO) that are synchronized with other U.S. or allied efforts. Some commanders have argued that the primary consideration for an operation is the actually the strategic communication, to include the information-related capabilities, which is then complemented by traditional military operations. Either way, for the OLW commander, the key is to understand the policy objective and then plan and execute military actions to achieve policy objectives. There must be a clear linkage between what you are doing and why you are doing it. Effective strategic communication requires that the military operational environment is reconciled with the information environment and there is no “say-do” gap.

Who has the Lead?

Strategic communication is commander's business! The term "strategic" communication naturally suggests the involvement of the highest levels of government. National security policy as articulated in the White House briefing room is eventually translated into WARNORDs, commander's intent, planning guidance, talking points, operational objectives, and ultimately tasks for tactical forces. Furthermore, the manner in which the military executes an operation (how the military acts) is as critical to the strategic communication process as strategic policy. Commanders understand intuitively that there is a political and diplomatic component to every military operation. As such, strategic communication considerations are typically reflected in commander's guidance and intent in order for the plan to be suitable in both the operational and information environments.

JFMCCs may be familiar with the evolution of Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO) over the past decade. Initially, the objective was to support counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation operations by conducting compliant boardings in the CENTCOM region. Typical MIO boardings were relatively straight forward and involved boarding the ship, inspecting for contraband, collecting any relevant information, and finally departing the ship. However, over time, MIO boardings were also viewed as an opportunity to reinforce theater security objectives since the boarding teams were directly interacting with mariners at sea. Seeking to take advantage of this opportunity, boarding teams were provided with trinkets such as water bottles, gloves, and hats and were also required to participate in cultural awareness training. In so doing, the execution of the basic MIO task was enhanced after planners gave more consideration as to "how" the task should be done, which ultimately was informed by the overall strategic objective. This is but one example of addressing both the operational and informational environments at the OLV.

Considerations for the Commander

- Incorporate strategic communication considerations into operational design. The cornerstone of a plan, the operational design is the first step in addressing the challenges presented to the commander. Consider the risks in the information environment as the operational plan develops.
- Incorporate strategic communication into planning guidance and commander's intent. Explicitly mention issues relating to strategic communication in order to shape the planning process and help integrate strategic communication considerations into Courses of Action. Discuss the manner in which an operation is executed and how it may affect operational objectives.
- Ensure the staff is organized and aligned to support the strategic communication process. Organizationally, some commanders have created staff elements to help support the strategic communication process. For example, some staffs have a Strategic Communication Advisor or a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) who reports directly to the commander. Other staffs assign strategic communication responsibilities to the J/N9, J/N5 or J/N39. There are tradeoffs with every approach. If the strategic communication function is too distant from plans and operations, strategic communication considerations

are often detached from the plan, risking lost opportunities or mismatches of words and deeds. Conversely, if the strategic communication function is deeply embedded in plans and operations then the significance of the larger information environment context may be overlooked. Finally, if strategic communication is too PAO centric, the effort may become focused on talking points and media headlines to the exclusion of the operational impacts. The staff organization must meet the commander's requirement to effectively manage the relationship between actions conducted in the operational environment, their effect on the information environment, and the strategic objective to ensure fleet activities support operational and informational objectives.

- Socialize your vision of strategic communication with the staff. No matter the staff organization, strategic communication is a team sport. Clarify battle rhythm expectations. Be on the lookout for those who do not appreciate the significance of supporting strategic communication efforts.

Considerations for the MOC

- Ensure strategic communication issues are considered during Mission Analysis. When planning an operation, the mission analysis process provides an opportunity to ensure higher headquarters' strategic communication intent and guidance are fully understood. Be cognizant of the words, themes and messages incorporated into orders. Use the Mission Analysis Brief to clarify the critical strategic communication issues and seek additional guidance to ensure COA development is on target in the information environment.
- Analyze the information environment. If the Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment is insufficient, request more information or detailed analysis. Key government figures, social media sites, traditional media, language, culture, and religion are all important factors related to the information environment. Significant historic events are often cultural touchstones that can be used to either create support or engender hostility when discussing issues. Identify other entities that may impact the operational environment, such as allies, other components, NGO's, etc.
- Conduct target audience analysis. Once you better understand the environment, identify, prioritize, and analyze the various audiences that have a stake in the activities to be conducted. These audiences are not always categorized as "adversaries." Consider desired effects and how best to accomplish those effects. Understand the objectives, interests, and relationships between and among the target audiences identified.
- Maximize the role of information-related capabilities (IRC's) as appropriate, based on target audience analysis. Key Leader Engagement (KLE), Public Affairs, Information Operations, Civil-Military Operations, Joint Interagency Coordination Group (or maybe just the Political Advisor), Military Information Support Operations, Intelligence and Cyberspace Operations are some of the likely IRC's that may be used to either monitor or shape the information environment relevant to on-going operations. Information Operations has the lead for integrating information-related capabilities in support of the commander's objectives. See Joint Pub 3-13 for an extensive discussion of the information environment and the role of IRCs in military operations.

- Have a plan for proactively communicating with key audiences when bad things happen. The JFMCC must be prepared to participate in the information environment, either through the media or personal communications, when tactical actions fail to meet strategic objectives. The MOC must support the commander by being prepared to rapidly respond to unforeseen events that might have a detrimental impact on key audiences. Establish a proactive staff process to gather information (on scene reports, images, or intelligence reports), identify erroneous or conflicting information, collaborate with key counterparts and push the information to the commander.
- Include strategic communication in the operational assessment process. Consider the use of public polls, social media analysis, intelligence, coalition force input, media analysis, and personal engagement with key audiences as inputs to the assessment. Be prepared to take a long view on complex issues. Strategic communication can help deter adverse action but it will be difficult to prove definitively.

Strategic communication does not replace public affairs, information operations, or other activities designed to engage audiences in the information environment. Rather, it is intended to be an overarching framework to support leadership decision making and support staff processes so that tactical military actions are consistent with strategic objectives.

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¹ JFQ, 4Q, 2009