"WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND HE IS US"

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

SUMMARY

PREPARED BY THE
NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

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By the time the green International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) flag was lowered for the last time at NATO headquarters in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, over 1 million NATO troops, civilians and contractors had served in theatre and many continue to do so as part of NATO's commitment to Afghanistan. The financial cost is estimated conservatively to be at least $1 trillion US dollars. Almost 3,500 troops from 29 nations lost their lives, and tens of thousands more suffered serious injury. By any metric it is the longest, most complex, expensive and fractious operation in NATO's history.

The information environment today bears little resemblance to when the ISAF mission began. The past decade has witnessed a transition from the implications of the 'strategic corporal' to that of the 'strategic tweet' and adversaries have become increasingly more capable at using new communication tools. While it may be unlikely that the Alliance will conduct another mission like ISAF, important lessons can be drawn about policy, doctrine and capabilities to ensure that NATO Strategic Communication (StratCom) is fit for purpose in future operations.

The NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence was engaged to carry out an examination of the NATO StratCom effort during the ISAF years 2003-2014, with a particular focus on Public Affairs, Psychological Operations and the coordinating function Information Operations. It is the most extensive study to date of NATO StratCom, drawing from nearly 100 interviews with persons having direct knowledge of the Afghanistan mission from across the full scope of the campaign, representing many different nationalities and responsibilities. Source material includes speeches, NATO and ISAF briefings, extensive media reporting and a substantial collection of published literature. Numerous experts reviewed chapters throughout its development, and the report was peer reviewed by 22 experienced practitioners from 8 nations, from all communications disciplines.

The study aims to question the commonly held view that NATO 'lost' the communications battle by assessing how effective the collective StratCom effort was and to understand the factors that contributed to its successes and major shortcomings.

KEY FINDINGS

The report finds that from the outset, NATO did not anticipate or recognise the scale and scope of the StratCom effort and resources required. While ISAF served as a forcing function for important, incremental improvements in NATO information-related policy capability and capacity, developed over more than a decade of continuous operations, the transformation of the information and operation environments happened much faster than NATO and member nations have been able to evolve their StratCom related mind-set, structures, capabilities and outputs.

In an environment of significant complexity, NATO had to prosecute two communications campaigns during the ISAF operation. The first was for the domestic support of the 51 troop contributing nations and international audiences. Messaging from NATO nations was often discordant but given the lack of a comprehensive approach, incoherent policy, the prolonged campaign period and a high operational tempo, the Alliance communication effort did considerably better than it is given credit for.

The second campaign was the operational battle for the support of the population and against anti-government elements. If success in this field is measured against the aims of information related capabilities - Public Affairs, Psychological Operations, and Information Operations - then the outcomes are decidedly more mixed, if not a failure.

An assessment of capability and performance supports the argument that ISAF was a flawed structure incapable of conducting a unified political-military campaign. Despite this, support in Afghanistan for international forces remains high and troop contributing nations have not endured major political recriminations because of the mission. The ISAF communications effort, therefore, cannot have been a failure. The size of the collective effort by NATO nations has been a considerable expression of Alliance will and commitment. From the political-military centre of gravity – *maintaining the solidarity, cohesion and credibility of the Alliance* – this alone points to a strategic success.

The report also finds that StratCom cannot entirely change the effects of bad policy and poor operational execution. Strategic communications outcomes during the years assessed were not nearly what they could have been but were considerably better than critics suggest. Where policy and operations were well connected and showed results, StratCom amplified that effect. Where policy and operations were weak, negative outcomes could be mitigated but not overcome. Improving strategic communication effects needs to start with better policy, greater understanding of audiences including motivations, conducting operations following established and successful military principles, and skilled practitioners.

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The report concludes that the absence of doctrine or good overarching policy in an organisation like NATO is an invitation for confusion. Conflicting messages from 28 nations confuse target audiences and undermine strategy, so *process* is important: a strong NATO StratCom policy and/or Military Committee policy is a good start. Good intentions cannot make up for lack of *capability,* though, as process without capability makes for an ineffective campaign. The key to making it all work together is *mindset*, in which the value of communicating an action is an instinctive part of the deliberation, planning and decision-making process from the start. An ideal situation is therefore to consider StratCom as a *mindset* that is a *process* based *capability,* then to get the campaign strategy and supporting policies right.

The weakest link in the Alliance communication effort at all levels was the lack of trained, expeditionary communication- and information-related capability in almost all NATO member nations. For NATO to be more effective, nations need to professionalise their approach to communications. This means abandoning the model of employing willing general service officers eager to learn on the job to one that is based on qualified, trained and experienced practitioners.

The findings of the study are addressed by ten recommendations:

PROFESSIONALISE THE FORCE
Include expeditionary national military capability in all disciplines of StratCom in the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP).

FIX THE DOCTRINE
Surge all NATO information doctrine and policy updates at once as a holistic package, to obtain a unified baseline that could last for several years. Get practitioners talking 'up and out', not 'down and in'.

BUILD BRIDGES BETWEEN INFO COMMUNITIES, NOT BARRIERS
Separate structure and activities between truth/deception, not by functions. Clarify roles and responsibilities for Info Ops in a StratCom world. And, change the names of Info Ops and Psy Ops in NATO military doctrine.

EXTEND THE GLOBAL OUTREACH EFFORT
Enhance outreach capability with audiences in the regions that NATO operates from or may be expected to operate from (Middle East, Africa, Asia).

GROUP FUNCTIONS TOGETHER
At military headquarters, nest the functions related to StratCom in one Deputy Chief of Staff-level grouping, but protect the direct line of Public Affairs to the Commander.

FOSTER BETTER INFORMATION SHARING
Commit to an information classification system and release procedures that make it easier for practitioners and commanders to publicly use information to best advantage.

POLICY SHOULD GUIDE <u>ALL</u> ACTIVITY
NATO StratCom policy should provide an overarching political communications framework that guides all activity, not just the information functions.

UPDATE CRISIS RESPONSE TOOLS
Update mechanisms that draw on national information-related capability that supports NATO, including the Peacetime & Crisis Establishment, and Crisis Response Measures.

ENHANCE EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS
Establish deeper, more mutually beneficial relationships with private industry and academia.

ESTABLISH A SURGE STRATCOM CAPABILITY
Consider establishing a Joint Communications Activation Team (JCAT) as a 'Smart Defence' initiative, providing rapid response and surge StratCom capabilities.