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NATO Challenges for the Future

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Air Power and Strategic Communications

NATO Challenges for the Future



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NATO Challenges for the Future

Joint Air and Space Power Conference 2015



**Joint Air Power
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This read ahead is a JAPCC product realized in collaboration with the researchers who have been developing the Study 'Mitigating the Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower', commissioned in 2014 and with the support of the experts from the NATO's StratCom Centre of Excellence in Riga, Lithuania. It provides independent and provocative views, which might not be entirely in line with official NATO policies, aiming to feed the expected debates during the upcoming JAPCC Conference 2015.

Disclaimer

This publication is a product of the JAPCC. The views expressed in this work are those of the authors. It does not represent the opinions or policies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and is designed to provide an independent overview, analysis and food for thought regarding possible ways ahead on this subject.

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Foreword

The Joint Air Power Competence Centre (JAPCC) welcomes you to attend our 2015 Air and Space Power Conference in Essen, Germany, from 23 to 25 November 2015.

The JAPCC is an accredited NATO Centre of Excellence which aims to provide key decision-makers with effective solutions on Air and Space Power challenges in order to safeguard NATO and the Nations' interests. Our internationally renowned annual conference provides an interactive forum for delegates to exchange ideas and perspectives on Joint Air and Space Power topics.

Over the past ten years, the JAPCC conference has attracted senior political, military, industry and academia leaders, with attendance of above 130 flag officers in the last two years. The theme of this year's conference is:

'Air Power and Strategic Communications – NATO Challenges for the Future'

For NATO, the value of airpower is clear. It's equally as clear to its adversaries, some of whom have minimal military capability to counter it and must instead leverage the information environment as their predominant weapon. As SACEUR, General Philip Breedlove, stated at the Wales Summit, 'the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare' developed around the Ukrainian crisis, challenging the Alliance's strategic communications capabilities.

There has been relatively little study on the role of strategic communications and airpower. The intention of the JAPCC is to deepen NATO's understanding of this relationship. NATO requires public support to conduct

operations and must improve its ability to communicate airpower's role in strengthening international peace and security.

We believe that the key issues of strategic communications can only be addressed through a frank dialogue that involves leaders and top experts from all levels of the political, academic, military, and media spheres. In this years' conference and during the course of the JAPCC research project on airpower and disinformation, we are fostering this dialogue to better understand the shortfalls and to develop sound solutions so that NATO airpower can meet its future challenges.

I strongly encourage you to read the attached paper to facilitate crystallizing your insights on the ways to improve the narratives, themes, and messages related to the employment of airpower in the benefit of achieving the Alliance strategic political and military objectives.

Please join this critical dialogue – we need your thoughts!



Joachim Wundrak

Lieutenant General, DEU AF
Executive Director, JAPCC

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Executive Summary

Strategic Background

At the Summit in Wales last year, Allied political leaders, in response to the changes in the security environment in and near Europe and to the enduring threats from the Middle East and North Africa, pledged to enhance NATO's deterrence and collective defence capabilities. The implementation of the 'Readiness Action Plan' (RAP) requires long-term actions that need support amongst NATO's national publics. A key element to the success of the assurance and the adaptation measures of the RAP is the Alliance's ability to communicate them in a coherent manner as well as to effectively counter the opponents' disinformation campaigns in order to gain and preserve public and political support.

Russia's recent information campaign challenges NATO's StratCom capabilities with a long-term approach to discrediting the Alliance and the Western nations in general. In response, NATO's strategic communications must remain transparent and clear, responding to disinformation with information instead of propaganda. To achieve this vision, NATO and NATO Nations must invest in StratCom capabilities. The credibility of NATO has to be maintained and improved in the eyes of its members and their publics. It is impossible not to communicate, as everything the joint force does sends a message. Joint force operations, strategies, policies and plans all communicate Allied intent.

Strategic Communications and Air Power – The Need for the Debate

It is essential that the Alliance possesses the necessary tools and procedures required to deter and respond effectively to hybrid warfare threats. This includes enhancing strategic communications capabilities, which, when appropriately understood, applied and resourced, are a key enabler of political

and military security success. NATO's joint air power must be part of, and effectively contribute to, this effort. Any crisis in NATO strategic communications is also a problem for the deployment and use of NATO airpower.

Joint air power is a critical enabler of the RAP and provides decision-makers the capability to assure access, maintain freedom of action, display a show of force or conduct limited strikes while being adaptable and scalable in response. Air Power is also a critical enabler of joint war fighting. The more prominent air power becomes in operations, the more likely it will be targeted in disinformation campaigns designed to distort or malign the Alliance's intent and/or quality of operational execution.

The last decades of airpower employment reflect that the asymmetric advantage which airpower provides to NATO is vulnerable to disinformation campaigns waged by adversaries. NATO and NATO Nations cannot afford a decrease in the credibility and relevance of air power, which has repeatedly proved to be a first option for policymakers in crisis management and collective defence situations.

Actions, words, and images send messages to a global audience. Thus, it is our goal to bring together top experts from the political, academic, military, and media spheres to build a collective best approach towards articulating coherent, cohesive, and consistent narratives, themes, and messages that ultimately contribute to deterrence, indivisibility of security, and freedom of action for the Alliance.

Structure of the Conference (4 Panels)

Panel 1: Strategic Communications and its Relationship to Airpower

Recent Allied operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and, equally, the actions against ISIS evince that strategic communications are a critical aspect

of airpower employment, one that will impact the success of future Allied operations. These experiences reveal how important it is to minimize not only civilian casualties and collateral damage but the impact these things make on the public perception against a backdrop of hostile forces' ability to exploit and exaggerate them.'The failure to properly communicate and to develop a convincing near real time estimate of what has actually happened after any given use of airpower affects now every aspect of air operations.'¹

We invite speakers and attendees to our conference to reflect and bring insights to core questions which we are going to debate within this panel:

- Are NATO doctrine and resources for Strategic Communications adequate? How effective is NATO in strategic communications concerning policy and airpower?
- What are the main deficiencies and vulnerabilities of NATO strategic communications in terms of airpower?
- What is the role of airpower as seen through the lens of Strategic Communications?
- What do recent conflicts teach us about the relationship of Strategic Communications and airpower?

Panel 2: The Media and Perspectives on NATO Airpower

At times throughout modern history, the media and the military have been at odds with each other and it is possible that friction between the military and the media will continue to some degree in the future. In spite of this friction, strategic leaders and war fighters see the increasing power of media as a strategic enabler to mitigate operational risk. The media wants to tell the story and the military wants to win the war and keep casualties to a minimum, which at times leads to conflicting desires. However, the media can tell their story, and if there is a rapport and understanding, they can tell it well and effectively.¹

Key issues to be explored in this panel:

- How do the media portray NATO airpower to the public?
- As the military and media come from very different organizational mind-sets, are they talking at cross purposes? Is there a clash of cultures between the military and the media that inhibits the discussion of airpower and NATO operations?
- Media between force multiplier and tool of disinformation campaigns to NATO air power.

Panel 3: Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower

The team of researchers supporting the JAPCC project 'Mitigating Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower' performed five country studies to investigate on how airpower is perceived from media reports. The results of studies show some interesting differences among major NATO nations about how the public in those countries perceive the use of airpower and their support for NATO and Western coalition military operations:

While, in the United States and Great Britain (similar public approach is assumed also for Canada), the public is broadly supportive of coalition military operations in cases where there is a clear *causus belli* and justification for the use of large scale military force, in Germany and Italy, public opinion is almost opposite. The perception of the French public might be placed at the middle of the scale. Nevertheless, the researchers concluded that the public opinion in Germany and Italy is more vulnerable to anti-NATO disinformation campaigns than in US, Britain or Canada.

Some key questions to be examined within this panel include:

- How does disinformation affect the broader public discourse surrounding NATO's employment of airpower?

- How effective is disinformation against NATO airpower? What are the main themes of that disinformation?

Panel 4: Preserving Credibility

Credibility and consistency are the foundation of effective communication; they build and rely on perceptions of accuracy, truthfulness, and respect. Actions, images, and words must be integrated and coordinated internally and externally with no perceived inconsistencies between words and deeds or between policy and deeds. Strategic communication also requires a professional force of properly trained, educated, and attentive communicators.

The adversary will often view domestic public opinion as a friendly centre of gravity and attempt to influence it. Therefore, the Alliance must improve its methods for informing the international audience regarding its mission and actions. Some key questions:

- How can NATO Strategic Communications best present NATO policy and airpower?
- How can NATO Strategic Communications best prepare in terms of organization, doctrine, planning and training to meet strategic communications/airpower future challenges?

Key Strategic Level Recommendations to NATO Strategic Communications

- I. NATO must recognize its current weaknesses in strategic communication and the method to justify the necessity of military operations to the general public.
- II. There is a need for large, specialized information agencies to lead the battle for strategic communications.

- III. NATO strategic communications needs to readily admit mistakes and problems but must aggressively challenge the narratives of NATO's opponents.
- IV. Airpower is a key component of NATO operations, but NATO must be careful not to oversell airpower or emphasize the need for relatively bloodless campaigns.

Endnotes

1. 'The Air War Against the Islamic State: The Need for An Adequacy of Resources', Anthony H. Cordesman 29 Oct. 2014.

Introduction

‘Despite lack of an agreed definition, there is a vague impression of consensus that when one of us says “strategic communication”, we all know what we are talking about.’

Christopher Paul’

Strategic Background

Today NATO is facing an array of challenges in foreign and military policy that will shape its future. The threat environment has significantly altered during the last decade, with rising terrorist forces in the Middle East and North Africa and Russian aggression in the Ukraine. The need for collective defence is greater today than at any time in the last twenty years.

Despite the threat environment, NATO Nations are struggling to meet their agreed requirement to spend two percent of GNP for national defence. Notwithstanding rising terrorism and Russia’s massive military build-up, only a few NATO states have the will to spend significant sums on defence. Indeed, over the coming years NATO will likely see a reduction of all its military capabilities. In short, NATO’s strategic position is not strong. NATO Nations need to urgently make the case for better capabilities to meet current and future threats.

At their summit in Wales, in September 2014, the Heads of State and Government of the member countries of the Alliance approved a Readiness Action Plan (RAP) to ensure NATO is ready to respond swiftly and firmly to current and foreseen challenges. The core message of the RAP is that, although committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes by diplomatic efforts, NATO is willing and able to undertake military operations carried out under article 5 of the Washington Treaty while its commitment

to support the resolution of worldwide crises remains unchanged. This message reaches various audiences, not all of which are intended: the national populations and the foreign population, including allies, partners, and adversaries.

Both the Assurance and the Adaptation measures of the RAP require long-term actions. A key element to their success is the Alliance's ability to communicate them in a coherent and opportune manner as well as to effectively counter the opponents' disinformation campaigns in order to gain and preserve public and political support. As an alliance of democratic nations, NATO can only develop and field forces with the fundamental support of national populations. Once popular support is absent, it becomes politically difficult to continue to conduct military operations.

However, after two decades of military operations, public support for NATO is not as strong as necessary. Indeed, it can be argued that NATO is in a crisis of Strategic Communications (StratCom) since the lessons we have learned during the last conflicts are far from being fully implemented.

*'Communication superiority is a prerequisite for success in irregular warfare, just as air superiority is a prerequisite for victory in conventional war. To date [2008] we have been ineffective in the strategic communication campaign to strengthen the will of our own people, to weaken the will of our enemies, and gain the support of people around the world. In the current battle of wills, strategic communication is the centre of gravity.'*²

Is this statement topical? At their summit in Wales, the Heads of State and Heads of Government of NATO member countries stated that 'it is essential that the Alliance possesses the necessary tools and procedures required to deter and respond effectively to hybrid warfare threats, and the capabilities to reinforce national forces. This will also include enhancing strategic communication.'

Since the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, Russia developed an aggressive information campaign as part of its hybrid approach to conflict by using all available means 'to stir up problems they can then begin to exploit through their military tool. The most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare was part of the first Russian push in Ukraine.³ Russia's campaign demonstrates that in the current and continually evolving information environment, power and control can easily be gained by manipulating information to affect not only financial markets, business practices and public policy, but also to influence societal perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. While information itself has tremendous value, how it is presented transforms that information into an important strategic tool. NATO and the EU must adapt to the new reality wherein information superiority, as opposed to military power, is becoming increasingly important.

Russian propaganda accuses the Alliance of a series of mythical provocations, threats and hostile actions stretching back over 25 years. Russia claims inter alia that 'NATO is a threat to Russia and has a Cold War mentality; Russia has the right to oppose NATO-supported infrastructure on the territory of member states in Central and Eastern Europe; NATO has bases all around the world and NATO exercises are a provocation which threatens Russia.⁴ This approach is meant to work over the long-term – and the long-term goal is to discredit NATO and the Western nations in general.

In response, NATO's strategic communications vision is well-defined by its secretary general: 'We will remain transparent and predictable. We will continue to respond to disinformation with information, not propaganda.⁵ With regards to strategy, the Alliance has 'to engage in this informational warfare; the way to attack the false narrative is to drag the false narrative into the light and expose it.⁶ Moreover, '(if) we want to counter Russian propaganda today, not just about Ukraine, but also about the fake accusations they make about Europe, we have to unite our lines and speak with the same voice. And for all of that, we should invest more into our capabilities and skills.⁷

Strategic Communications and Air Power – The Need for Debate

Any crisis in NATO strategic communications is also a problem for the deployment and use of NATO airpower. One of the difficulties NATO airpower is facing today is not a lack of technological capability, which has steadily improved over the last two decades, but a lack of public understanding and support.

NATO's airpower provides it a huge asymmetric advantage. It is, therefore, the top target for media and disinformation campaigns by NATO opponents. NATO opponents engage in disinformation campaigns, many aimed specifically at airpower, to influence the Western media and public to limit and even renounce the use of airpower in campaigns against terrorists or aggressor states, thereby nullifying NATO's critical military advantage.

Since the adversaries that NATO and Western coalitions have faced in the last two decades are well below NATO in terms of military capability and cannot contest NATO in the air, they aim at NATO's critical vulnerability – the will of its people. If adversaries cannot defeat NATO in the air they can do the next best thing – they can conduct information campaigns that categorize the use of airpower as an inhumane means of waging conflict, thus making its continued use democratically unsupportable. The effects are the same. Thus, information campaigns that use disinformation and misinformation are central elements in any radical group strategy when fighting NATO.

While NATO must play by strict rules, some of its adversaries violate laws and international norms with impunity to further their cause. The spreading of false information and fighting so as to endanger or kill civilians are very effective means of undermining public opinion. Such strategies have been commonly used in the past and they can be expected to be part of any future conflict that NATO might fight.

The impact of public support and its shaping via strategic communications vehicles such as media coverages has not been studied and researched over the last decades. However, it is an issue that lies at the heart of any use of NATO military force and, thus, impacts the use of airpower in support of NATO objectives.

The JAPCC believes that the issue of strategic communications and airpower is a priority that needs to be addressed in a thorough and systematic way. The key questions enounced in the executive summary must be addressed now. In seeking answers to these questions and to help NATO develop a response on the issues of strategic communications and airpower, the JAPCC is supporting research on the subject and has made it the theme of its 2015 Conference.

Each of the subsequent chapters of this Read Ahead provides background information on the content which we aspire to see developed during the specific sessions of the conference. Nonetheless, we aim to enable all likely participants to develop their own insights on the topics in order to see them actively engaged in the expected debates of the conference.

The JAPCC Study ‘Mitigating Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower’

A study on Airpower and Disinformation was commissioned by the JAPCC in 2014. The intent of the study is to support the development of a better understanding of airpower and strategic communications. The team members of the Study have compiled, organized and analysed a large database of approximately 1,700 media stories concerning airpower and NATO over the last two decades, including translations of media stories from Chinese and Arabic language sources. The team also collected a large number of public opinion polls and academic studies relating to airpower and public perceptions. An important part of the database is an analysis of several

dozen websites that deal with airpower matters and conflicts involving airpower. It is within these sites and from various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that much of the public data concerning the use of airpower and civilian casualties is analysed.

This Study aims to ask some very tough questions about airpower and NATO and national StratCom and to explore the problems in an objective and critical manner. Given the problems confronting NATO and airpower, anything less than a frank assessment that aims to highlight the problems and find solutions would be a waste of effort and money. In several ways, as this Study will illustrate, the media reporting on airpower and the public opinion in NATO's countries might make the difference between an effective response to strategic problems or strategic failure.

The Study also examines how airpower is broadly understood in the Western nations and seeks to understand how disinformation campaigns and misinformation about air operations affect public opinion and, in turn, how these perceptions affect policies concerning NATO's use of airpower. The larger study includes five case studies of nations that have used airpower on active operations and are likely to use airpower again, focusing on public attitudes towards airpower and NATO operations. The countries for case studies will be: Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy, and the United States.

How the media portrays airpower and the effect on public opinion are central themes of the Study. Airpower is also examined in a broad sense, so a summary of public views on Unmanned Aerial Systems is included.

In order to draw trends and historical lessons on how airpower is presented and perceived by the public and the themes used by NATO adversaries to discredit NATO air operations, the authors of the Study scrutinized the major NATO air operations of the last two decades as a base of historical reference.

This Study will make specific recommendations as to the vulnerabilities of NATO airpower to disinformation in future operations and will develop doctrinal recommendations to best counter the expected enemy media campaigns and media characterizations of airpower. The Study will also provide specific recommendations on developing NATO StratCom. The team is using the database and analysis to also develop short training courses for air staff officers and Ministry-level officials to handle the issues of airpower and the media in future operations.

The initial outcomes of the analysis performed by team members of the study, specifically with regards to the country case studies, will be singled out within a dedicated panel during the conference.

Endnotes

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StratCom and its Relationship to Airpower

1

‘Communication superiority is a prerequisite for success in irregular warfare, just as air superiority is a prerequisite for victory in conventional war.’

Sam Holliday’

The Framework – Policy and Resources

After their summit in Strasbourg/Kehl, the Heads of State and Heads of Government of NATO member nations underlined the increasing importance for the Alliance to communicate ‘in an appropriate, timely, accurate and responsive manner on its evolving roles, objectives and missions. Strategic communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance’s political and military objectives.’ Following that pledge, NATO released, in 2009, a Strategic Communications Policy, which was followed in 2010 by the Strategic Communications Concept which outlines the framework for Strategic Communications planning and execution by NATO military forces.

The strategic environment has significantly changed since 2010. Adversaries continue to develop increasingly sophisticated ways to disguise the instigators and perpetrators of conflict so as to seed confusion and develop doubt in the minds of the public and of those charged with conflict prevention and resolution. ‘The threat of conventional warfare

has changed and we have to recognize that information can be a weapon. Whether used for disinformation, deception or plain fabrication to create false narratives, we have to be aware of and be able to respond to this challenge.²

'Analysis of the Ukraine conflict suggests that NATO and the EU must adapt to the new reality where information superiority, as opposed to military power, is becoming increasingly important.³ The power of communication has been both understood and used since Sun Tzu and NATO officials are beginning to see its rising criticality. 'While information has always mattered, we are now in the Information Age, where the power of information itself has become transformational and revolutionary. Where once information was a part of the mix, it is now, as General Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian Armed Forces has noted, increasingly dominant. It forces us to significantly re-evaluate and revise tactics, strategies, training, organisation, and doctrines.'⁴

Challenged by the increasing complexity of the information battlefields during the last decade of conflicts, many NATO bodies and Nations have developed significant national capabilities and understanding in the fields of Public Diplomacy, (Military) Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PsyOps). While progress has been made, particularly at the operational level, more synchronization between disciplines within a coherent doctrinal framework would help the Alliance to achieve more interoperability on multinational operations and could transform strategic communications into a tool that is more effective in helping to achieve political and military goals.

Although agreed policy and doctrinal documentation exists for the military contributors to NATO Strategic Communications in the form of Military Committee (MC) documents and Allied Joint Publications (AJPs), the AJPs are not fully integrated and lack a comprehensive, overarching point of view.

The NATO StratCom policy illustrates the difficulties of getting an ambitious policy at the level of 28 nations. We have to address this issue during the conference and to debate how the current policy should be improved and also whether a long and complex process of ratifying and then reviewing an 'AJP for Strategic Communications as a capstone doctrine in line with policy'⁵ is required. The opportunity of other flexible and adaptable solutions, such as directives (ACO 95-2, SACEUR directive on StratCom) should be also investigated.

Having in place strategic communications policies or doctrine clearly doesn't solve the problem. 'Ensuring information and communication aspects are placed at the heart of all levels of policy, planning and implementation and fully integrated in the overall effort'⁶ requires adequate resources. 'Our leaderships (*S/C*) want more, and they want it now, because the hybrid warfare conducted by Russia is happening now, just as groups like ISIS are also demonstrating their skill with information campaigns. But is the demand exceeding the capability? If the communication community cannot deliver, we risk disillusionment from the customer, and while more resources are part of the answer, we must also make the best of what we already have.'⁷

Taking note of the shortage of trained and experienced personnel, the combined effort of all available resources is required. 'Pulling communicators into a grouping can produce critical mass and would enable a more effective integration in delivering effects, more influence from the side of communicators and might open up opportunities for growth in numbers and seniority. At the same time, key principles – such as Public Affairs Officers having direct access to commanders for Public Affairs issues – should be respected.'⁸ Unfortunately, as a general rule, the demand greatly exceeds capacity, which is further exacerbated by the lack of staff experience. This highlights the responsibility of nations to supply those personnel resources.

Airpower Perceptions and the Conflicts of the Last Two Decades

Recent Allied operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have underlined that foreign policy goals cannot be achieved by military power alone. The common refrain that Allied forces should also seek to win 'hearts and minds' as a means to deliver enduring peace and stability speaks to the importance of non-military means and 'soft' power in connecting with populations both at home and abroad. 'Strategic communications, correctly understood, are an integral part of this approach.'⁹ NATO's air power must be part of, and effectively contribute to, this effort.

All of the above mentioned operations and, equally, the actions against ISIS evince that strategic communications are a critical aspect of airpower, one that will determine the success of future Allied operations. They reveal how important it is to justify and minimize the impact of civilian casualties and collateral damage in the public perception against a backdrop of hostile forces' ability to exploit and exaggerate them. 'The failure to properly communicate and to develop a convincing near real time estimate of what has actually happened after any given use of airpower affects now every aspect of air operations.'¹⁰

The narratives of StratCom develop in line with the air operations planning process as an integral and, in some cases (specifically those related to the rules of engagement in civilian-populated areas or near protected objects), critically important part of the process. Aside its importance, the law of armed conflict does not solely influence the drafting of the rules of engagement. In their final form, these rules also normally reflect collateral limitations, which include political considerations, national policy objectives, and operational concerns. This relationship needs flexibility and adaptation at all stages of the planning and conduct of air operations, especially when actions fail to meet planning parameters by generating casualties or collateral damage.

The Afghanistan Case

Recent NATO operations in Afghanistan provide vital insights on the intrinsic relationship between StratCom and Air Power, where the use of airpower in the strike role became one of the most controversial issues of the conflict:

An irregular warfare environment such Afghanistan often generates friction with the local political leadership and the population within the area of operations. Combined with fragmented international public opinion, a lack of local community support threatens the success of tactical battles or can even lead to defeat at the strategic level.

Overcoming the clash of cultures and the complex local politics is key to the effectiveness of StratCom campaign. Communicating NATO's message to the Afghanistan people and building trust was difficult. No matter how NATO troops might tried to understand and respect the local culture, the tribal Islamic Afghanis did not trust Western motives.¹¹ Furthermore, the President of Afghanistan was one of the primary problems in NATO's relationship with the Afghani government and people. President Karzai's repeated condemnations of NATO and open accusations that NATO had targeted and indiscriminately killed civilians made communication much more difficult.

Deceptive communications advanced by Taliban had immediate impact on local public opinion. Almost any time that NATO used airpower in a strike role, the Taliban, headquartered in Pakistan, would put out a claim that NATO aircraft had attacked and indiscriminately killed civilians. Because of the nature of the war and the difficulty of reaching isolated tribal areas, it was in some cases impossible to fully investigate each claim of civilian loss and to release timely public reports. Nonetheless, in many cases, President Karzai made statements about civilian casualties before

any factual investigation had been completed, in some cases relying on reports from his governors or appointees who promulgated their version of events before ISAF could even compile a report.¹²

‘Information is the strategically decisive front in counterinsurgency and we need to use information operations to ... conquer.’¹³ An information campaign needs to target the correct audience, establish primary vectors to communicate the message, and shape the battlespace and communicate in a timely manner. The primary audience in a counterinsurgency is local people. The media releases must be honest and transparent with the information available. The worst thing is to be silent. Silence creates the perception that negative information is hidden and consequently, legitimacy will suffer. Finally, the amount of information provided to public on insurgent atrocities and their tactics of using human shields to avoid airstrikes must be appropriate in order to balance the opinion of public on both insurgents and counterinsurgents.

Another important lesson learned by NATO public affairs officers was the importance of communicating to the Afghani population through well placed locals. The ISAF public relations team cultivated a network of well-placed Afghanis who had connections with both the government and with the Taliban. ‘When after an air strike the Taliban headquarters made their usual claim that NATO had killed civilians, ISAF public relations staff disseminated the ISAF account of the incident through their Afghani contacts, who would counter Taliban claims by word of mouth and through the Afghani media. In Afghanistan it was the only effective way to get the ISAF story out to the Afghani public.’¹⁴ It has to be mentioned that this approach was complementary to the successful campaign of the Combined Joint Psychological Operations Task Force (CJPOTF) in blaming insurgents.

Endnotes

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9. 'Strategic Communications and National Strategy A Chatham House Report', Paul Cornish, Julian Lindley-French and Claire Yorke.
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12. Interview with Lt Gen Joachim Wundrak (ISAF Deputy chief of staff 2011), in Jun. 2015.
13. Ronald Keys, US Air Force 2007 Counterinsurgency Symposium.
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The Media and Perspectives on NATO Airpower

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On Media, Information and Conflict – The Nature of the Problem

Throughout modern history, the media and the military have been at odds with each other. The military is perennially popular, disciplined and hierarchical and lives within a homogenous, closed culture that often is hostile to outsiders. The news media are often unpopular, functioning independently, without rules, regulations or even a Code of Conduct except for some that are self-imposed. Newspapers, Radio, TV and Cable have a variety of interests of their own and set goals to be achieved. When the two institutions meet during a conflict, clashes are inevitable, primarily due to the perception gap between what is feasible and what is desirable with respect to the conduct of warfare.

The media are attracted to conflicts because they are larger-than-life events. They generate dramatic pictures that speak for themselves and maximize the appeal to the emotions of viewers. The ability of the media to dramatize events and create a global audience for a conflict puts policy-makers under pressure to take decisions faster and with less time for reflection than at any previous time in human history. In today's conflicts, in some cases political leaders spend as much time explaining or justifying a conflict to their public opinion and to the media as they actually do running them.

The media are primarily interested in the compelling image, which becomes the reality of the day with significant impact on the citizen's perceptions. The media's principle is simple: 'no pictures, no news'. Thus, the picture of a civil vehicle collaterally damaged by an air attack might become the reality of the war obscuring the situation where 200,000 people are expelled from their homes, as was the case during the war in Kosovo.

The media wants to tell the story, and the military wants to win the war and keep casualties to a minimum. The media wants freedom, no censorship, total access and the capability to get their stories out to their audiences quickly. The military on the other hand, wants control. The greatest fear of a military commander is a leak of classified information that might give relevant tips to an adversary. On the other hand, the media fears that the military might inhibit news coverage for enhancing their public image or cover up their mistakes. Levelling these fundamental differences will require enhanced cooperation from both sides in the future as there are wise heads in both institutions that recognize the mutual need. 'The media is hungry for stories while the military need to tell their story. Above all they need public support. The media can tell their story and if there is a rapport and understanding, they can tell it well and effectively.'¹

The media that specializes in defence issues and airpower, the 'trade journals' that are normally sympathetic to Western airpower, argue that NATO and its member nations are too eager to over classify information in order to restrict media access to the operational environment realities. Fact is that there is a clear separation between a press that sees its duty as to promote the public's right to know and a government that increasingly tries to protect sensitive documents that are often vital to effective foreign policy. In 2010, in coordination with major commercial media organizations, the website called *Wikileaks* published the *Afghan War Diary*, a collection of over 76,900 classified documents detailing the war in Afghanistan, and

released also the Iraq War Logs: 400,000 documents that recorded the details of every American casualty in Iraq and Iran. The creation and explosion of *Wikileaks* exposed vulnerabilities in the security of classified government information.

Many military leaders have become aware that news media coverage of their operations can be a force multiplier. It is most likely that friction between the military and the media will continue to some degree in the future. In spite of this friction, strategic leaders and war fighters grasp the increasing power of media as a strategic enabler to mitigate operational risk. From a military perspective, the difficulty will be to respond to the increasing requirement from civil leaders and pressure from the media to provide more details on military actions while respecting the information security restrictions. Used prudently, media is indeed a Force Multiplier, as it builds public opinion.

Media Reporting on Airpower

We live the *Information Age* where information systems are so vital to the military and civilian society that they can be the main targets in war, and they can also serve as means for conducting offensive operations. Today there is more media than ever before and more information available for the public. Thus, is not *breaking news* to notice that Air operations in Afghanistan and Western air operations against ISIS receive extensive coverage. What is to note is the way they are reflected through the lens of media.

Some media groups have a high level of credibility and present well-researched reports while others have a blatant bias and present data that is so flawed as to be useless to support serious analysis. When it comes to civilian casualties caused by Western forces or Western air strikes, the figures can vary widely. 'For example, one website (of many) trying to provide

a count of civilian casualties provides data for Afghanistan that puts the number of children killed in 2015 air strikes between zero and eighteen.² This is typical of the many websites that cover casualties.

The team researchers supporting the JAPCC project *'Mitigating Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower'* carried out an analysis of four major websites that counted civilian casualties and the estimate of percentage of civilians killed by NATO air operations in Afghanistan varied from a low of 7% to a high of 34%. Since air strikes often take place far from any Western troops and, in many cases (drone strikes), it is impossible to do an on the ground evaluation after a strike, Western forces do the best Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) that they can. But that is still difficult at best. On top of these difficulties, in places like Afghanistan the local officials concoct their own version of events guided more by tribal politics than facts and that version is not likely to be reliable.

Media bias is one of the most common problems of strategic communication. Groups that are anti-NATO usually aligned with the far left or right, have well-designed websites featuring anti-NATO messages. In Western nations, with a free press, such messages are legal and must be tolerated. On the other hand, most websites and NGOs that cover defence and airpower issues try for some measure of objectivity and credibility. The media is both a friend and enemy, but it remains a feature that Western nations must deal with. However, an anti-Western and anti-NATO, and especially an anti-American, bias in media reporting is common and can have an effect on how the public views military operations.

A notable example of bias in media reporting comes from the 2001 US operation to airdrop food to starving Afghans who were being blockaded by the Taliban regime as part of the *Enduring Freedom* operation. The *Enduring Freedom* airdrops, which lasted 68 days and delivered 2.4 million food rations to the Afghani people, were a highly successful humanitarian operation

that certainly saved thousands of lives and alleviated suffering. As such, one might expect generally favourable coverage in the Western news media. In fact, that was not the case. While the coverage of the food airdrops was viewed in a favourable manner in most US newspapers, the news coverage in some of other parts of the world tended to be unfavourable.

Journalists writing about the events relied heavily on official reports and information from a variety of NGOs and agencies, many with an anti-American bent. In the first week of the operation the left-oriented UK *Guardian* ran headlines such as 'Aid Agencies Reject "Risky" Food Drops'; 'Folly of Aid and Bombs'; 'Fears Grow over Food Drops'; 'Drop the Food Drop'; 'Food Parcels Fail to Win over Arab World'. Surprisingly, even usually conservative the London *The Telegraph* reported that food drops were a bad idea with headlines such as 'Dropping Aid is No use: give Money to the Afghans'; 'Afghans Burn US Food Parcels'; 'Grand Spectacle, But Not the Way to Feed the Hungry'. *Le Monde* in France also took a negative view with the headline, 'NGOs Take Issue with Coupling Humanitarian, Military Actions'. A sampling of stories from eleven major Western newspapers (Europe, Canada, and Australia) and five UK newspapers found 78.6% of the British stories with negative headlines and 41.7% of the Western newspaper stories with unfavourable headlines – the other stories being either neutral or positive in their language.³

What the Afghanistan humanitarian airdrop does tell us is that even when airpower is used carefully and successfully in a non-kinetic role and has a positive effect, there are still many in the international mass media who will spin the facts to conform to their world view, be it anti-American or anti-Western.

Communicating Across Cultures

In both military and civil environments we often hear the refrain 'We failed to understand the culture of our counterparts/opponents'. It is fact that

our style of communication is central to how we address conflict and the content and method of communication can vary greatly between cultures. It seems, however, that cross-cultural communication between the West and the Middle East is specifically difficult because of communicative and cultural barriers.

The team of researchers supporting the JAPCC project '*Mitigating Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower*' developed a database that includes a large number of international public opinion studies as well as a large sample of news and commentary from major Middle Eastern media centres such as *Al Jazeera*. Most of them reveal the serious communication challenge that Western nations have throughout this region. Part of this is cultural and part is due to poor media coverage on the side of the West. The *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)* tends to be widely watched in the Middle East and has some credibility, but other Western efforts have flopped. In 2002 the US State Department set up an Arabic Language television network to broadcast to the Middle East and present the American perspective on the news in the region. Despite large expenditures the US State Department Arabic network, *al Hurra*, has a lower than 1% viewership in the Middle East. Apparently, the Middle Eastern peoples do not like the format or content. Conversely, and worryingly, the Russian Federation's *RT Arabic* television is widely watched in the Middle East and is highly popular in key countries such as Egypt.

A major development in the Middle East is the widespread use of social media. Radical movements have become expert at developing high quality websites and using social media to further their message. ISIS makes use of websites and well-produced films to show atrocities and instil terror among local populations. ISIS also shows its positive side, with ISIS songwriters and ISIS music meant to inspire Muslim youth and circulated on the social media. Currently, there is no effective means for Western nations to challenge such messaging.

When talking on subjects like radical Islam, Western leaders have little to no credibility amongst Middle Eastern populations. If radical Islamic movements are to be challenged, the message must come from Middle Eastern Muslim leaders who enjoy credibility with their populations.

Interestingly, the problem of cultural cross communication works the other way. In 2013 *Al Jazeera* bought a small television network and proceeded to establish a full news and commentary program geared to the US public. Despite enormous effort and vast expenditure, *Al Jazeera America* in 2015 had no more than 15,000 viewers. The *Al Jazeera* style of news and commentary had no appeal for Americans. It is clear that there is a major need to study national media and culture by all sides wishing conduct communications in a different culture.

Endnotes

1. Gp Capt Sultan M Hali, 'The Role of Media in War', *Defence Journal*.
2. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism Website tries to cover all the NATO and Western air operations. See the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 'Afghanistan, most recent strike July 20, 2015'. Casualty figures given: Total Killed 324–477, civilians killed: 14–39; children killed: 0–18; Injured: 23–28. These general figures are typical of all the websites trying to count casualties.
3. David S. Farrow, 'Dropping Bombs and Bread in Parallel: The Effects-Based Food Drops of Operation Enduring Freedom', SAAS Thesis, Jun. 2004. Farrow provides a good overview of the whole operation. On his analysis of world press coverage see p. 71–74.



Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower

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'Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. He who molds public opinion goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes or decisions possible or impossible to execute.'

President Abraham Lincoln

Disinformation, Misinformation, and Public Perception

Disinformation has been part of information operations in conflict for centuries. It can be used as part of a long-term strategy to undermine public confidence in the government and key institutions, such as the Church or the military. Disinformation can also be used tactically in the short term to discredit a particular act or operation.

In countries and groups that oppose NATO and Western nations, disinformation is often used to falsely attribute civilian casualties to air operations and ground operations. 'Enemy groups also construct false narratives and create stories to imply that NATO and Western forces are deliberately insulting Islam, or have an agenda to forcibly convert the local populations.'¹ Such false stories are meant to appeal to the base fears, prejudices and ignorance of the local population, demonizing foreign forces and winning support for those who craft the narrative. Other

common themes of disinformation are accounts of NATO deliberately targeting civilians or attacking religious centres where people are innocently praying.

Misinformation is closely related to disinformation in its effects but is much more common. Rather than being deliberate, misinformation is commonly caused by a poor use of sources, overreliance on biased informants or material, or on the publication of unverified and poorly understood information. Misinformation can occur because the reporting agency, the media or an NGO, for example, might have a minimal understanding of military operations or conditions. In other cases, even reputable and experienced media will publish poorly researched and unverified (but sensational) material due to the 24/7 pressure to get news stories and commentary out more quickly than competing networks.

The tactics used by insurgents (using civilians as human shields, using hospitals and mosques as military centres, firing rockets and mortars from school grounds to invite counterbattery fire, placing military positions amongst the population) throughout the Middle East conflicts of the last three decades are well known. They have resulted in so claimed major propaganda victories for insurgent and irregular groups.

In the Iraq conflict, the insurgent forces used more than a dozen mosques as military strongpoints in the 2004 battle for Fallujah. When the US forces engaged the insurgents and damaged the mosques the insurgents could make the propaganda claim that the Americans were attacking Islam.

In Afghanistan, although ISAF operated under tight rules of engagement and paid compensation to families of civilians killed or wounded in the course of military operations, the constant Taliban disinformation campaign was quite successful in creating discontent against the ISAF forces

within local as well as international public opinion. In 2008, a poll of Afghans showed that over 60 per cent of the population believed that NATO airpower was killing too many civilians.

It is important to emphasize that this might not have been true, but in an insurgency, it is public perceptions that matter in the long-term, and the airpower disinformation campaign in particular was causing some very negative public perceptions. In addition, 'by 2008 every NATO nation showed a lack of public support for the Afghanistan War. While the role of airpower was not a specific question in the public opinion polls, the majority of people polled in every country that committed troops to ISAF showed a lack of confidence in the strategy and likelihood of success.'²

Nonetheless, it can be stated that the asymmetric advantage of airpower was vulnerable to the disinformation campaigns ruled by the insurgents in Afghanistan. Unable to counter the kinetic effects of airpower with force on force application they turned to asymmetric means, aiming to either render kinetic airpower ineffective or to persuade the population and political leaders to force the coalition to hold back the use of kinetic airpower. 'They used information warfare as much as combat.'³ Al Qaeda forces routinely sought to shape encounters with coalition forces into situations where collateral damage and casualties become an exploitable issue. A combination of actual collateral damage, actual civilian casualties and the insurgents' propaganda machine eventually led the Afghan government to request restrictions on coalition airstrikes.⁴

Thus, in 2008 General McKiernan, ISAF commander, issued new rules on employing air strikes that limited their use and tightened the rules of engagement. On taking command of ISAF in 2009 General Stanley McChrystal put even more restrictions on the use of airpower and ground firepower in order to win better public support for the NATO-supported national government. Although this strategy involved greater risk to NATO

forces, McChrystal explained to Allied leaders and to Afghans 'the need for greater restraint and the need to accept risk to improve the counterinsurgency climate by taking away one of the Taliban's major propaganda points.'⁵ McChrystal was able to further the action on the ground by a surge of thousands of additional US ground troops.

Country Studies – How Airpower is Perceived in Major NATO Nations; The Vulnerability to Disinformation

The team of researchers supporting the JAPCC project 'Mitigating Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower' performed five country studies to investigate on how airpower is perceived. The results of studies show some interesting differences among major NATO nations about how the public in those countries perceive the use of airpower and their support for NATO and Western coalition military operations:

In the **United States and Great Britain** (similar public approach is assumed also for **Canada**) the public is broadly supportive of coalition military operations in cases where there is a clear casus belli and justification for the use of large scale military force. For example, in the countries that have suffered the most casualties and engaged in some of the toughest military operations in Afghanistan the public support for the conflict remained strong to 2007–2008 when public opinion soured on what was a seemingly endless war with no noticeable progress. The British and American public were strongly supportive of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan at the beginning of their troop commitment there. The loss of public support over time is a very common phenomenon in every war that Western powers have fought against irregular enemies since the end of the Second World War being tied to the public's perception of success and a reasonable fear that the sacrifices been made by the soldiers are in vain. Any failings of strategy are attributed to the political leadership and a lack of strategy, and not to the soldiers and airmen fighting the conflicts. These

are deeply embedded cultural attitudes in both the United States and Great Britain and if forces from those nations are committed to a NATO military campaign in the future public support will be strong, but only on the condition that there is a clear *casus belli*, the national interest is clear and the likelihood of success is high. Public opinion in these countries is not noticeable affected by disinformation campaigns.

The **German** case study shows a marked contrast with the American and British one. After World War II the German pacifist sentiment was very strong and remains so. The public opinion of the armed forces is almost the opposite of the US/British public opinion. In any case of NATO using force, the Germans are far more susceptible to disinformation campaigns and anti-military campaigns than most other NATO nations. In short, a variety of political and cultural factors make Germany a very problematic case in terms of supporting NATO military operations and in agreeing to any use of force in service of NATO.

The study of **Italy** closely resembles that of Germany, with a very strong leftist and pacifist sentiment in the general public and also a public that opposes the use of force even if a NATO country were directly invaded. Like Germany, Italy had a very strong anti-NATO and anti-military movement in the 1980s and much of the old left remains and also remain hostile to NATO. As in Germany, the status of the armed forces in the eyes of society is not high. Like Germany, Italy is more open to anti-NATO disinformation campaigns than the US, Britain or Canada.

France is somewhat of an outlier in this study of NATO nations. France is less bound to NATO, having stayed out of the NATO command structure for more than three decades and only recently returning to full military cooperation. France has a strong leftist and pacifist movement and anti-American sentiment motivates a sizable minority. On the other hand, France has a tradition of supporting military intervention in NATO's areas

of interest to include interventions in North Africa. France is more willing than Germany to commit forces to direct combat operations and sends its forces on missions with fewer caveats.

Using Lawfare to Limit and Criminalize NATO Military Operations

Currently, one of the main issues in the legality of war debate is the use of drones in conflict with irregular forces and radical groups. Armed drones, which have been acquired by several NATO nations and used by the United States for more than a decade, can carry out many of the missions of a strike aircraft but with less risk of losing pilots. For several years, various NGOs and groups aligned with the UN have argued that the use of armed drones against terrorist groups is illegal under international law. Whilst the United States has contested this in legal arguments, UN-aligned and international groups argue that ANY use of drones in the strike mode is wrong and this is reflected in major media stories.⁶

The recent report on the Gaza conflict by a UN staff group implies that causing ANY civilian casualty by air action constitutes a war crime. In short, lawfare advocates are setting the bar far beyond any reasonable standard. This means, as lawfare progresses, even force used with the highest level of care in accordance with traditional international law and force used to defend one's own nation against attack could be immediately classified as a war crime. The effect is to portray NATO and the Western nations as criminals and at the same time apply a double standard as terrorist groups and dictatorships (claiming victim status) are seldom held to any standard of law at all. One should remember that few people were ever arrested or held accountable for the Srebrenica massacre of 1995 – although it was a fully documented mass murder of thousands with numerous witnesses.

Russian Information Program

Over the last decade, Russia has carried out an extensive information campaign against NATO, as NATO is seen as a primary threat to its strategic interests. The Russians mount essentially two large scale information campaigns. The first is oriented towards their indigenous populace and designed to support a xenophobic worldview in which peaceful Russia is under constant threat from Western powers, who seek only to undermine and impoverish Russia. The main themes of the Russian nationalist ideology are found in the four volumes of *Project Russia*, the official ideology of the Russian state which paints the West as the ultimate villain.

As an adjunct of their internal information campaign, the Russian media concentrates considerable effort on broadcasting and providing literature to the Russian ethnic minorities in the Baltic States and the Ukraine. The Baltic States as well as the Ukraine, are special targets for Russian media operations. The Russian campaign aims to destabilize the Baltic States and the Ukraine and portray the democratic governments there as illegitimate.

Some of the internal Russian propaganda goes to great lengths to float conspiracy theories that are a staple of the Russian disinformation campaign. In 2014, when forces in the Ukraine shot down a Malaysian Airline flight, the Russian media floated several stories, the first being that the Ukrainians had shot down the plane and wrongly blamed the Russians, and the second being that the shoot down was part of an elaborate NATO/CIA plot to discredit Russia. The Russian media also use blogs and social media to push such stories.⁷

The second part of the Russian information offensive is oriented towards the West and generally refrains from the crudities and open xenophobia of Russian-oriented propaganda. The media campaign aimed at a Western

audience targets the elites and political left with the theme that Russia has been a victim of Western exploitation since the end of the Soviet Union, and that the Western nations violated an international agreement made in 1990–92 to not expand NATO. The expansion of NATO is portrayed as a straightforward example of Western aggression. The Russians claim they are acting only for survival and self-defence in invading the Ukraine. NATO manoeuvres in the Baltic States, including the Baltic air policing program, are characterized as illegal and aggressive moves against Russia. In fact, there was never any international agreement or understanding to not expand NATO and the Russian position is an example of pure disinformation.

Although the Russian information campaign has a limited impact with the general public in the West, NATO nations should expose and refute its inaccuracies. The Russian propaganda themes, as unbelievable as some are, are meant to work over the long-term – and the long-term goal is to discredit NATO and the Western powers in general. In any contest with Russia, the Russians can count on having a fully controlled media at home and a solid group of the European hard left who will be ready to support the Russian line.

Awareness from the Ukrainian Crises⁸

Russia's information campaign was central to Russia's operations in Ukraine. The general conclusions of a report developed by StratCom COE offer valuable insights for NATO's approach to strengthen and adapt strategic communications to face current and foreseen challenges:

Information is a powerful tool of influence: Russia has demonstrated that in the current and continually evolving information environment, power and control can easily be gained by manipulating information to affect not only financial markets, business practices and public policy, but also influence

societal perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. While information itself has tremendous value, how it is presented transforms it into an important strategic tool; NATO and the EU must adapt to the new reality where information superiority, as opposed to military power, is becoming increasingly important.

The information campaign was central to Russia's operation in Ukraine: Taking over Crimea without any military confrontation demonstrated that the concept of well-constructed influence operations is a very essential part of Russian operational planning and that Russian military forces have a propaganda mind-set well applied at strategic level while being in development at tactical level.

Russia was prepared to conduct a new form of warfare where an information campaign plays a central role: Analysis of the crisis in Ukraine has shown that the Russian military has been systematically developed over the past 10 years and become able to skilfully employ 21st century tactics that combine intense information campaigns, cyber warfare and the use of highly trained Special Operations Forces.

Russia's narrative is reflected in its key state policy documents: Analysis of the most popular Russian TV channels proved that the narrative used in the information campaign against Ukraine is supported by key Russian state policy documents. This can serve as a basis to develop alternative narratives in preparations to counter Russian propaganda in the future.

Crisis in Ukraine is a result of Russia's long term strategy: Learning from the Russian information campaign in Ukraine, it is clear that early detection and analysis of elements within the Russian narrative which signal potentially aggressive behaviour are critical. Russia's state policy documents contain indications which should be further analysed so as to develop potential future scenarios of Russia's actions and Allied responses.

Deception is used by Russia as a tactic to distract and delay: Whereas the Alliance is bound by the requirement to speak and act with transparency and truth, there is no such requirement compelling Russia to do the same. Investigating and disproving the false information, different versions of events and even conspiracy theories rapidly disseminated by Russia requires a lot of time, effort and resources on the part of international organizations, the Ukrainian government, independent media, experts and even ordinary citizens.

Disinformation campaigns erode over time: The evolution of the crisis in Ukraine beyond Crimea demonstrates that disinformation campaigns erode over time as more and more evidence is revealed to negate lies and falsifications.

Endnotes

1. Despite being careful in dealing with the population and showing great sensitivity for the Afghan culture, many Afghans believe that Westerners have a secret agenda to convert Muslims to Christianity. In cultures where the vast majority of the population is illiterate and has little contact outside their own tribe or village, such misunderstanding of foreign cultures is normal.
2. Source: a large number of polls of major polling groups including international polls by the Pew Foundation, CNN polls, Gallup polls etc. All indicated a general lack of public will to support the Afghan War by 2008.
3. Ronald Keys, US Air Force 2007 Counterinsurgency Symposium.
4. Eugene L. Mcfeely, 'Balancing kinetic effects of airpower with counterinsurgency objectives in Afghanistan'.
5. Gen Stanley McChrystal, 'My Share of the Task: A Memoir' (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).
6. See 'Drone Strikes by US may violate international law, says UN', Guardian, 18 Oct. 2013. See also 'RAF's crew's role in US drone unit revealed', Guardian, 23 Jul. 2015.
7. The JAPCC Project 'Mitigating the Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower' database has a collection of Russian media translated and several stories from Russian media on the Malaysian Airline shoot down theories.
8. This section constitutes an extract from the StratCom Centre of Excellence report: 'Analysis of Russia's information campaign against Ukraine'.



NATO needs to readily admit StratCom mistakes and problems, but must also aggressively challenge the media of NATO's opponents.

Overall

While NATO and its member states are often quick to emphasize the importance of effective strategic communications in practice their efforts tend to be fairly reactive and are often focused on communicating existing programmes and priorities to NATO societies at large. This is certainly necessary but not sufficient: improving transparency between NATO's military instruments and the public is essential, particularly if members want to build support for reversing declines in defence spending. NATO needs to support member states in strengthening the credibility of the Alliance and explaining why shared resources and burdens are so vital to addressing the challenges that members face.

However, this is only one side of the issue. During the past decade of operations, NATO forces learned how imperative it is to counter the media narratives of adversaries. In Afghanistan, winning the support of locals required ISAF, alongside the Afghan government, to be an agile and effective communicator of its progress, intentions and objectives while simultaneously countering the arguments articulated by the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

Russia's behaviour with respect to Ukraine has underscored the urgency with which NATO and NATO Nations must become more effective at 'offensive' public diplomacy, even beyond the capabilities developed for Afghanistan.

A robust StratCom strategy will be necessary to underscore the alliance's political credibility, consensus and the international legitimacy of any actions taken. It will also have to respond to the public narrative of an adversary (something that Russia has used very effectively over the past decade, if not longer) and make transparent not just to elites but also to the public the intentions and objectives of the NATO response, limiting any sense of provocation.

Key to the success of this strategy to support the achievement of Allied and National political and military objectives will be the StratCom experts' ability to develop appropriate narratives, the will of political leaders to adopt them and the commitment of military leaders to implement them.

Key Principles for NATO Strategic Communications

Emphasize the human rights aspects of the conflict.

Human rights is the area in which NATO has the advantage, as NATO enemies are normally groups and countries with no regard for human rights. Failure to obtain and maintain public support for military operations is directly related to the moral justification for war. In Iraq in 2003, the Bush administration made a major strategic mistake in emphasizing the possession of WMDs by the Saddam Hussein regime. During the 1990s, Saddam Hussein carried out a mass murder programme that systematically killed as many as 250,000 Iraqis in torture chambers and the vast killing fields uncovered by the Coalition Forces in 2003. If the evidence of Saddam

Hussein's atrocities had been widely publicized the public support for the war would have been much stronger. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan before 2001 exhibited near total disrespect for human rights, with mass executions of prisoners and extreme brutality towards the civilian population. Indeed, the Taliban brutality and disregard for civilian casualties from 2006 to 2011 even led to Osama bin Laden to criticize the Taliban for their attitude.¹ The Srebrenica Massacre of 1995 provided ample justification for a more vigorous air campaign against the Serb forces that, if prosecuted, might well have led to a general settlement of the Yugoslavia conflicts in 1995 rather than requiring another war in 1999.

The current operations against ISIS, whose programme of mass murder, repression of minorities and war crimes include burning prisoners alive – all publicized by their own media – should ensure considerable public support for more decisive military action against the ISIS regime. In all these cases, the public have a clear moral choice between countries that fight according to traditional rules of war and with a regard for human rights and groups that despise such basic rights.

In all future conflicts NATO should deploy sizable media teams to record and publicize the human rights abuses of the enemy and should bring evidence before the public immediately and continually. We should not expect the media to cover such stories in depth and to provide the analysis.

NATO and national strategic communications should be more transparent and open.

The media that specialize in defence issues and airpower (the 'trade journals') are normally sympathetic to Western airpower and argue that NATO nations are too eager to over classify information. All NATO campaigns should be followed with detailed and public after-action reports that present a comprehensive analysis that does not gloss over mistakes

and failings. Such reports need to be led by experts who work outside the defence ministry chain of command and who can ensure objectivity and public credibility.

A model for this is the Gulf War Air Power Survey carried out by the US Air Force after the 1991 Gulf War, which was led by a non-Defense Department employee. The detailed seven-volume study pointed out the many successes of the US Air Force operations in the Gulf War but also noted the mistakes and the failings (for example, failure to destroy a single SCUD) and provided a base of solid information to develop the force and improve capabilities.

The UK's ongoing Iraq War Inquiry – *The Chilcot Inquiry* – is to be mentioned as well. Although well intentioned, the Inquiry has now lasted longer than the war itself and its publication has taken many years. This has fostered great resentment in the British public and will undoubtedly make it harder for any future British government to secure public support for future operational commitments.

Given the current heightened threat situation in Europe, with ISIS and Libya on the fringes and an aggressive Russia invading the Ukraine and threatening NATO states, a thorough, objective and open after-action report on the air campaign in Libya that highlights capability gaps, munitions shortages and C2 issues in particular might provide justification for asking national parliaments for increased funding and force capability for NATO.

NATO also needs to publicly and aggressively challenge the lawfare movement and uphold the traditional Law of Armed Conflict rules of using force.

The lawfare movement, using civilian casualties as a justification, has moved not only to outlaw air munitions needed for future conflicts (cluster bombs are very important if fighting an enemy that is organized as a conventional

force) but is also trying to establish the rule that ANY loss of a civilian or civilian collateral damage is a war crime. NATO will use all resources at its disposal to avoid civilian casualties.

Strategic Level Recommendations

NATO must recognize its current struggles in strategic communication and in justifying military operations' necessity to the general public.

The *Pew Survey*, conducted in eight NATO countries in the summer of 2015, provides some alarming data. Answering the question as to whether their country might use force in case Russia attacks a NATO nation, in only the US and Canada did a clear majority favour a military response. In the UK and Poland a strong plurality agreed with the use of force (49% to 37% in the UK, 48% to 34% in Poland), but in Germany, France and Italy majorities responded that their country should not react with military force in case of a Russian attack on NATO.² **That the public in some key NATO countries do not understand the fundamental requirement for NATO collective defence means that NATO needs a fundamental revision of strategic communication frameworks. NATO needs to commit far more resources and effort to basic communication with the public.**

There is a need for large, specialized information agencies to lead the battle for strategic communications.

In the United States, the Cold War era saw the US Information Agency (USIA), an agency independent of the Departments of State and Defense that had ample resources and specialist knowledge to engage in the information battle against the Soviet Union and communist nations. That agency, which was highly successful in strategic communications, was disbanded in the 1990s as no longer needed. A small part of the USIA was transferred to the State Department, where it operates outside the mainstream of an agency that is geared more to diplomacy than intellectual and informational conflict. As a result, the US

strategic communications programme has faltered badly and is disorganized, lacks focus and is slow to respond effectively to issues such as the rise of ISIS and Russian aggression.³ The simple solution would be to revive the USIA to lead the information operations and strategic communications in twenty-first century conflicts. A similar approach for NATO is also required. Due to the cross-cultural aspects of the communications involving Westerners interacting with very different cultures, the Middle East being a prime example, a coherent strategic communications programme would also provide aid, assistance and expertise to support local regimes and to carry the core message of respect for human rights and opposition to terrorism and oppressive regimes.

As far as the Western public is concerned, NATO and the Allied armed forces have an advantage in terms of dealing with the media. In general, the Western public believes that the military has more credibility than the media. To maintain credibility, **NATO strategic communications needs to readily admit mistakes and problems but must aggressively challenge the narratives of NATO's opponents.**

Airpower is a key component of NATO operations, but **NATO must be careful not to oversell airpower, or emphasize the need for relatively bloodless campaigns.** The public must know that, whenever force is committed, there will be accidents and that there may be civilian losses and collateral damage. Prior strategic planning must be ready to educate the public on these issues.

Endnotes

1. Combating Terrorism Center, *Declassified Osama bin Laden Documents* (2014).
2. *'NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid'*, Pew Research Center, 10 Jun. 2015, p. 5.
3. Assessment of the team researchers who have been developing the study 'Mitigating the Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower'.

Conference Itinerary

23 November 2015

17.00–18.00	Registrations
18.00–21.00	Icebreaker* and Industry Showcase

24 November 2015

08.00–09.00	Registrations
09.00–09.30	Inaugural Session
09.30–10.15	Key Note Speech
10.45–12.15	Panel 1: 'Strategic Communications and its Relationship to Airpower'
12.15–13.30	Lunch*
13.30–15.00	Panel 2: 'The Media and Perspectives on NATO Airpower'
15.30–17.15	Panel 3: 'Disinformation Campaigns against Airpower'
17.15–17.30	Closing Remarks
19.30–22.00	Networking Dinner*

25 November 2015

08.00–09.00	Registrations
09.00–09.15	Opening Remarks
09.15–10.00	Panel 4 Preliminary
10.30–12.00	Panel 4: 'Preserving Credibility'
12.00–12.30	Closing Session
12.30–14.00	Lunch*

*Hosted.



Joint Air Power Competence Centre

von-Seydlitz-Kaserne
Römerstraße 140 | 47546 Kalkar (Germany) | www.japcc.org/conference