I HAVE SPENT a fair amount of my time in NATO dealing with the Strategic Communication concept, and as I look back on my tour — which is drawing to a close here at the Joint Warfare Centre — I have seen some progress made, but a lot of work still remains to be done when it comes to making “StratCom” a useful operational tool that is understood by the entire chain of command — as well as (and most importantly) understanding what it is, what it isn’t, what its limitations are and how it can benefit — or impede — a mission.

Two significant steps in the right direction are the ACT “Strategic Communication Handbook”, which is in its final stages of development, and the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia. While the handbook does not provide a definitive answer on how to ‘do’ StratCom, I do believe it may help commanders and staff officers better understand the concept. I have written about this topic in a past edition of The Three Swords magazine (Issue No. 23) and at the time of this article, I was not a very big StratCom fan. I still am not — at least as it is currently being practiced within NATO. As a StratCom and Public Affairs Observer/Trainer for JWC exercises, I have seen both the NATO Command Structure and the NATO Force Structure struggle to implement what they thought was a StratCom programme. I will not name names of commands, but the efforts I have seen have ranged from moderately effective to being a downright impediment to effective communications.

As an example of ineffective implementation, during one particular exercise the Public Affairs Officer (PAO) reported directly to the StratCom Adviser. His access to the Commander was limited because he had to first go through the StratCom Adviser, which is contrary to what is published in Allied Command Operations (ACO) Directive 95-2. It was not a formal reporting structure, but it was what was expected and understood. The danger of such a structure is when the PAO’s access to the Commander is limited by someone who is often senior in rank and does not have experience in media relations.

One of the primary problems I have with the StratCom concept within NATO is how it is being implemented, which is ever so inconsistent. The typical model I have seen involves a StratCom Adviser (usually at the OF-5 level) and a staff of three or four supporting personnel. So far, I have only met one StratCom Adviser who actually had a background in communications (whether through job experience, education or training). Expectations of the StratCom Adviser are often unclear, which means they are prone to “look” for ways to make themselves relevant and important to their Commander. Typically and unfortunately, this means interfering in the PAO’s business. At every command I have worked with during exercises, I have made it a point to ask the PAO how his relationship was with the StratCom Adviser.

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Adviser and I have never received a positive or enthusiastic endorsement of the concept. Some will argue that PAOs are defensive against the StratCom concept because they fear losing influence with their Commander. I would argue that it is because there is usually no added value in how StratCom is currently being practiced.

In all fairness of disclosure and transparency, I am a PAO with nearly 20 years of active duty experience. So, from a PAO’s perspective, I offer the following advice on how to “do” StratCom:

- **First and foremost** — understand that StratCom is more of a mindset than anything else. It needs to permeate the entire command to be effective. Staff officers from the Command Group to the lowest level planner need to always be thinking about the message certain actions sends to the enemy, to the local population, to the press, and to the general public — whether those actions are kinetic or non-kinetic.
- **The process of coordinating communications** should happen in a Communication Strategy Board, chaired by either the Deputy Commander or the Chief of Staff, not a StratCom Adviser. You don’t need a StratCom Adviser. I know many will disagree with this point, but coordination should be a normal matter of practice among the communication disciplines.
- **Ensure that your Joint Operational Planning Group (JOPG) considers the “effect” of their proposed actions.** Public Affairs is best suited to handle this — the PAO needs to be an integral part of the JOPG from start to finish. He or she needs to be the “sanity check” on operational plans and provide a perspective of impact to the local population and within the media.
- **The PAO must not be the last to know.** In other words, if your PAO is reacting to events rather than proactively planning, you have already lost the information battle.
- **Empower your PAO.** The PAO is your professional communicator — allow him to respond to events as quickly as possible.
- **Ensure your actions match your words and vice versa.** I think this one is obvious and should need no further explanation.
- **Have a robust Key Leader Engagement programme.** If there is anything truly strategic about communicating on the battle field, it is this. The commander and his senior staff should be engaging with the local population — police, village leaders, friendly military, religious leaders — anyone who is influential in the local population.
- **Coordinate your communication efforts** to ensure you are speaking with one voice. Again, this one shouldn’t need further explanation, but everyone — from NATO HQ down to the operational level — needs to be speaking with one voice. This does not mean everyone is repeating the same message; it does mean that messages are synchronized and aligned.
- **Ensure communication efforts are tied to strategic effects** — in other words, your messages, in whatever form they may be, are linked with a desired end-state.
- **Leave the politics and posturing to NATO HQ, where it belongs.**

Could it really be that simple? I personally be-
lieve that we have taken this concept of Strategic Communications and tried to transform it into some sort of operational weapon — yes, it can be an operational tool, but it is not a weapon. Regardless, it can help (when effectively implemented!) win a war just as quickly as it can help lose a war. No doubt, public opinion — within NATO Troop Contributing Nations, within the area of operations, and the international community at large — is essential to winning a war (or preventing one) and requires careful management. To quote Sun Tzu, "The supreme art of war is to subdue your enemy without fighting them."

The U.S. military has moved away from the StratCom term in its daily lexicon. That is not to say that the U.S. has abandoned the concept, but instead, it has come to accept StratCom as a mindset rather than a tangible product or person.

On the other hand, I believe we have taken the StratCom concept and tried to turn it into something more than it is. Truly, what commander does not know that any accidental bombing during an operation will have a negative effect on the local population’s attitude toward NATO forces? Or, that moving NATO troops into an area as a show of force sends a strategic message to the local population as well as the enemy? Or that taking out a few high value targets while risking a high probability of civilian casualties is going to perhaps help you win the battle but ultimately lose the war?

We know that our actions are magnified significantly more today than they were in past wars. There is a saying in today’s high-tech world that is very appropriate here: Everyone has a camera (cell phone) and there is a journalist on every corner (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook). We know that civilian casualties are regrettable but ultimately, inevitable — and that in today’s information environment, those casualties are magnified one thousand fold more than in the past due to today’s technology. Can you imagine the outcry of today’s media and the general public if during World War II the Allies undertook a bombing campaign such as that against the city of Dresden?

Not only are things magnified, they are being reported via these platforms at near real-time speed. We will always face an enemy who plays by no rules and does not value truth or accuracy in their communication efforts — their main objective is achieving an operational and strategic advantage — which often comes at the cost of truth. How do you counter that? With speed. We must be more agile in how we communicate our messages.

Yes, we need to be "smart" and "strategic" in how we conduct operations as well as truthful and accurate in what we communicate. But, StratCom is not the Holy Grail it has been made out to be that will solve our problems. The only way to counter propaganda and our enemy’s messages is with the truth. While it does not guarantee victory, NATO must be louder and faster with the truth than our enemy. Which is no small feat. +

FURTHER READING
The Three Swords Magazine, Issue No. 23
* The Commander’s Imperative as a Strategic Communicator (pages 31-35) by Major General Mari Eder.
* Strategic Communication or Smart Communication (pages 36-39) by CDR Daniel Gage.
The Three Swords Magazine, Issue No. 19
* Integrating StratCom into NATO exercises (pages 23-27) by Rita LePage.