

THE ALLIED COMMAND OPERATIONS COGNITIVE CAMPAIGN FOR

by Brigadier General Jay H. Janzen (Retired)
Communications Director
NATO Allied Command Operations



DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE



"Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy the fear to attack."

– Dr. Strangelove, in the 1964 film

"Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb"



NATO'S CONCEPT for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area ("Deter and Defend") is one of the most significant advancements in strategic thinking for the Alliance in a generation. It seeks to deter adversaries and terrorist groups from spreading destabilization, widening disorder, or accruing decisive military advantage that would impact our security. Implementing such a concept involves a myriad of important factors including integrated plans, effective command and control, advanced capabilities, high-readiness forces, and a robust military posture.

NATO's approach to deterrence rests upon the comprehensive nature of its capabilities and a collective commitment to mutual defence. The three core elements of deterrence include cohesion reflected in Alliance unity and resolve; capability evident in demonstrations of readiness; and communication to contextualize and amplify these elements with intended audiences.

This article will focus on the communications aspects of deterrence, including outlin-

ing the Allied Command Operations (ACO) approach to advancing "Deter and Defend" objectives in the cognitive dimension. Perceptions regarding NATO's cohesion, capabilities and resolve are essential to strategic success. For this reason, ACO has adopted a cognitive campaign designed to directly support the "Deter and Defend" strategy. The aim is to combine powerful demonstrations of military activities, together with focused and compelling communications, in order to reinforce perceptions that will advance overall "Deter and Defend" strategic objectives.

Military StratCom Objectives and Effects

At the strategic level, simplicity and clarity of intent are paramount. Shaping perceptions around NATO military activity across the Euro-Atlantic area, with a collective audience of more than a billion people, requires sustained and focused effort. As a result, ACO has identified four military strategic communications objectives as the core of its cognitive campaign in support of "Deter and Defend" during peacetime operations:

- 1) Alliance cohesion maintained
- 2) Alliance publics assured
- 3) Alliance legitimacy maintained
- 4) Adversaries deterred

These objectives directly address the fundamentals required to deliver strategic success in the cognitive dimension during peacetime. Success is almost certain if Alliance unity is perceived as unshakable, populations feel protected, NATO's legitimacy is unquestioned, and adversaries fully understand our capability and resolve to defend ourselves.

By establishing these simple and fundamental StratCom objectives, it is hoped that every headquarters, every mission element, and every person across ACO can easily visualize how they might contribute to the overall cognitive campaign.

In order to further delineate and operationalize ACO's military StratCom objectives, thirteen supporting military StratCom effects have been defined, among them "Allies perceived as unified and committed to collective defence", "Perceptions of transatlantic link reinforced" and "Adversarial narratives impacting NATO countered".

StratCom objectives are designed to be long-term and aspirational, and are thus in need of constant, coordinated efforts in order to progress towards their attainment. StratCom effects, on the other hand, are viewed as short-term desirable outcomes that might result from a potential effort or activity.

For example, enhancing perceptions of Alliance cohesion will entail a constant effort over time, and will need to be supported by an

PREVIOUS: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg aboard USS George H.W. Bush during NATO Exercise NEPTUNE STRIKE 2022, October 25, 2022. Photo by NATO **ABOVE:** The George H.W. Bush carrier strike group. Photo by Petty Officer Justin Wolpert.



ABOVE: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg briefs the media representatives present on board USS George H.W. Bush, October 25, 2022. Photo by NATO

array of actions, outcomes, activities, and communications. However, generating an effect where perceptions of the transatlantic link are reinforced can occur in the short term, for instance during the deployment of a U.S. carrier strike group or by highlighting the Canadian-led battlegroup in Latvia.

Such temporary effects need to be combined with many other complimentary effects over time, in a coordinated way, designed to engender progress among the overall StratCom objectives.

Combining Military Activity with Communications — Recent Examples

In October 2022, ACO leveraged several high-profile military activities and exercises taking place in the Euro-Atlantic area in order to generate cognitive effects. In Exercise NEPTUNE STRIKE 2022, the USS George H.W. Bush carrier strike group was placed under Supreme Allied Commander Europe's (SACEUR) command and control. This two-week-long vigilance activity included more than 70 aircraft, 20 ships, and 5,000 personnel from 26 NATO Allies and partners.

ACO deliberately focused on the "adversaries deterred" StratCom objective for the month. To support this, a supporting StratCom effect was selected for NEPTUNE STRIKE: "Awareness of NATO's advanced capabilities". To achieve this cognitive effect, ACO needed to bring media and influencers close to the action, which was unfolding far offshore in the Aegean Sea. Two media days were conducted aboard the USS Bush; one early in the activity to raise interest and awareness, and one near the end that included a visit of the NATO Secretary General to the carrier. Groups of media representatives were flown to the carrier, briefed on the operations of Allied components of the strike group, and given opportunities to interact with multinational sailors, aircrew, and senior commanders. Journalists were also given demonstrations of the advanced air and maritime capabilities that are integral to the group.

To further underscore NATO's advanced capabilities, a third media opportunity was planned at a military range in Slovakia. At this event, many more journalists were able to witness first-hand the extended strike capabilities of the carrier group, thus painting a clear picture of decisive military firepower.

The resulting multinational media coverage reached audiences across Europe and indicators suggest this included Russian officials and influencers. NATO digital teams also produced compelling content on NEPTUNE STRIKE, and select components were translated into the Russian language.

NATO's reach into Russian audiences is limited, and our communications during peacetime are always attributable, factual, and transparent. They are also designed not to be inflammatory. Communications from the military level of the Alliance almost never mention or comment on Russia. In exposing a wide range of Russian citizens and influencers to factual content that demonstrates NATO's capability and resolve, it is hoped that such efforts will enhance deterrence efforts and help preserve peace.

ACO also aimed to expand its reach to non-traditional Allied audiences during NEPTUNE STRIKE. A "digital influencers day" was planned aboard the carrier strike group. Influencers representing a wide range of digital communities were invited to participate in a dynamic visit to the USS George H.W. Bush, and five individuals were selected to participate. With this audience, the desired cogni-



tive outcome was not deterrence-related, but rather focused on assurance. The specific effect sought by ACO was "Alliance publics feel NATO posture/activities are appropriate."

The aim was to attract influencers from several Allied nations who engage audiences outside of NATO's usual reach. As an example, one of the influencers who visited the carrier strike group was a woman from the United States who engages digital audiences on alpine sports, healthy living, and environmental issues. She has a following that numbers in the hundreds of thousands, from demographic groups largely uninterested in purely military content. ACO hopes that such influencers can connect their interests with global security issues, in order to demonstrate the necessity and legitimacy of defensive military activities. At the time of writing, ACO had not completed an assessment of outcomes regarding the influencer day aboard the USS George H.W. Bush, but initial feedback has been encouraging.

Operationalizing StratCom for NATO

StratCom efforts such as those conducted during Exercise NEPTUNE STRIKE 2022 do not represent a radical shift in doctrine or thinking within ACO. Instead, the focus is on embracing the advances made in the StratCom community over the past decade and bringing these elements together in a strategic and systematic approach to the regular activities and communications of the Alliance.

The ideas are not new, but the processes and architecture that ensure unity of effort across the entire Euro-Atlantic area mark a significant step forward. The aim is to operationalize StratCom thinking and connect it with military strategy and operational activity across SACEUR's area of responsibility.

The "Deter and Defend" concept embraces multi-domain operations, and StratCom plays an essential role in such efforts. As such, ACO's cognitive campaign was deliberately designed to integrate with efforts in all domains and all dimensions. Activities in all domains have impacts on the cognitive dimension, and vice-versa. There is widespread recognition in ACO that strategic success is closely linked to achieving outcomes in the cognitive dimension. This in turn has led to the embracing of an audience-centric approach to

operations. The remainder of this article will explore ACO's StratCom architecture in more detail, in the hope that it will benefit StratCom practitioners and Alliance leaders who seek to integrate the cognitive dimension into multi-domain strategy and operations.

Annual StratCom Campaign Guidance

ACO has developed specific processes to ensure that the coordination of StratCom objectives and effects are adequately considered for all significant military activities and associated communications. The process begins each year with the publication of a Strategic Coordination Order for Area of Responsibility Management and Peacetime Vigilance. This document provides a framework to align NATO's peacetime vigilance activities, exercises, training, and communications with SACEUR's overall "Deter and Defend" objectives. Hundreds of such activities are conducted each year across the area of responsibility (AOR).

In order to provide a focus of effort, the Strategic Coordination Order identifies a few dozen activities that are considered priorities for ACO. Care is taken to select an array of priority activities that adequately reflect each domain, region and capability.

"The aim is to operationalize StratCom thinking and connect it with military strategy and operational activity across SACEUR's area of responsibility."

A Nuclear Alliance

"The fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. NATO's goal is a safer world for all; we seek to create the security environment for a world without nuclear weapons."

Extract from the
NATO 2022 Strategic Concept



Royal Norwegian Air Force F-35.
Photo by NATO

These priority activities are sequenced in a way that accounts for anticipated adversarial actions and the normal rhythm of Allied military activity. This ensures NATO sends the right signals at the right times, in line with the overall deterrence strategy.

To further align ACO's efforts, a StratCom annex to the Strategic Coordination Order provides additional guidance, including monthly priority StratCom objectives, as well as a compendium of desired StratCom effects for each priority military activity occurring in the AOR.

The Strategic Coordination Order is published in October for the following year, thus providing ample time for subordinate commands to conduct deliberate StratCom planning and coordination. This guidance is intended to foster a manoeuvrist approach, whereby Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) articulates overall objectives and desired effects, and subordinate headquar-



ALLIED COMMAND OPERATIONS STRATCOM COORDINATION

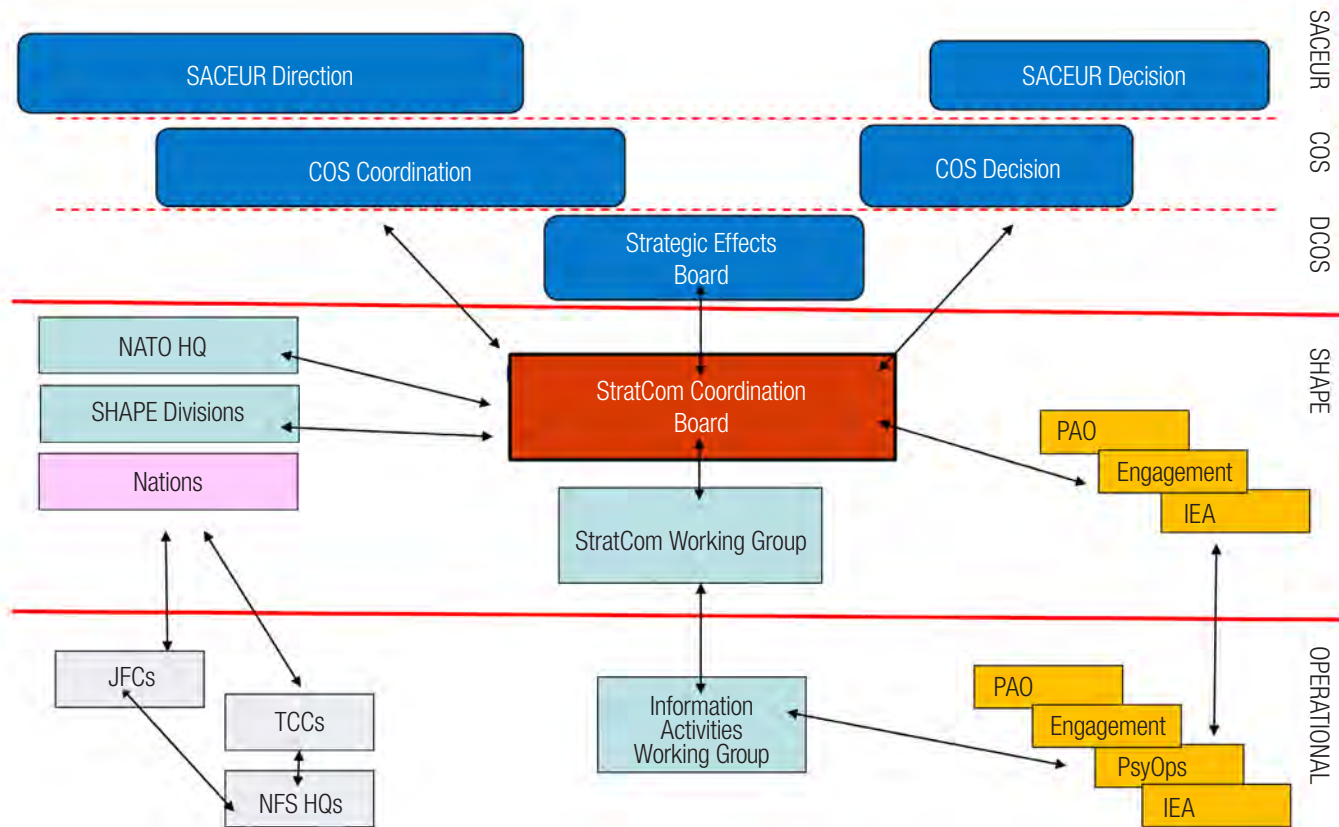


Figure 1 Abbreviations: Chief of Staff (COS); public affairs office (PAO); information environment assessment (IEA); joint force commands (JFCs); theatre component commands (TCCs); NATO Force Structure Headquarters (NFS HQs); psychological operations (PsyOps)

ters decide how best to achieve these outcomes within their respective areas and means.

Dynamic Campaign Management

Today's evolving strategic environment demands constant and dynamic campaign management to ensure StratCom efforts remain relevant and effective. ACO has developed an integrated battle rhythm to ensure that military activities and associated communications remain aligned with strategic intent and shifting geopolitical realities.

At the centre of these coordination mechanisms are the Strategic Effects Board and the StratCom Coordination Board (see Figure above). The StratCom Coordination Board focuses exclusively on generating effects in the cognitive dimension in support of SACEUR's military strategic objectives. It is informed by the efforts of working groups from across ACO

and from all information disciplines. StratCom chiefs from all ACO headquarters are invited to the StratCom Coordination Board, as are representatives from all other multi-domain functions. The focus of this board is not on communications per se, but rather on how ACO's priority military activities for the coming period can be leveraged to send the right messages to key audiences, thus generating desired effects in the cognitive dimension.

This approach recognizes that military activity itself creates effects in the cognitive dimension and that these impacts can be calibrated in intensity and directed at selected audiences using relevant communications channels. For example, the deployment of a carrier strike group can be relatively low-key if ships remain far from shore, conduct few communications activities, and do not conduct operations near adversarial areas of interest.

On the other hand, the same carrier strike group might host media representa-

tives and influencers aboard while conducting training missions together with maritime and air platforms from several Allied nations. Additional media members and influencers might be invited to a ground location thousands of kilometres away in order to witness the resultant range and combat power that such platforms can project.

The role of the StratCom Coordination Board is to consider the potential cognitive effects of ACO's military activities and communications (based on information environment assessment, including audience analysis) and to coordinate resulting efforts across ACO in alignment with the overall StratCom campaign (based on "Deter and Defend" objectives).

On at least a monthly basis, the ACO StratCom Coordination Board convenes to perform this cognitive campaign management function, with a specific focus on the upcoming 60-day period. The monthly StratCom objectives are confirmed, as are the priority



activities and the desired StratCom effects for each activity. The board considers whether the net effects of activities and communications across the AOR are aligned with current direction and are appropriate (given wider factors in the geopolitical environment).

The board devotes time to deconfliction, and members are invited to identify potential opportunities and risks prior to finalizing the cognitive campaign approach for the period. Immediately following the ACO StratCom Coordination Board, a national StratCom Board is held where StratCom chiefs from all Allied nations are invited to provide input on the ACO plan and to discuss areas of alignment and synchronization. The ultimate aim is the harmonization of all significant national and NATO activity across SACEUR's AOR, in order to send strong and unified signals regarding our collective deterrence and defence.

Following the StratCom coordination boards, key recommendations are passed to the ACO Strategic Effects Board, which is responsible for integrating effects in all domains and dimensions across SACEUR's AOR. The Strategic Effects Board considers effects in the cognitive dimension, together with multi-domain force posture, vigilance activities, intelligence collection, indicators and warnings, and other relevant operational factors. This ensures that ACO's approach to deterrence and defence accounts for all domains and dimensions, and remains synchronized with higher guidance as well as the current operating environment.

The emphasis throughout this process is on a manoeuvrist approach that provides strategic guidance, while simultaneously encouraging regional creativity and initiative in how military and StratCom effects are delivered across the AOR.

ACO StratCom Process and Functions

Cognitive campaign guidance and StratCom coordination are two key parts of the overall StratCom functions that ACO conducts on an ongoing basis. An overview of how ACO visualizes its StratCom process and functions can be found at Figure 2.

The process is visualized as a wheel, as it is continuously ongoing, and all elements are equally critical to overall success. The "understand" function is often regarded as the starting

point in the process, but in reality, this function is constantly conducted and needs to dynamically inform every subsequent component in the process. Planning is also dynamic within ACO. Long term planning, such as the development of campaigns or strategic coordination orders, can extend several years into the future.

Other plans consider limited periods of time or are specific to a particular issue, activity, or contingency. All such plans are revisited and updated regularly, and often make follow-on planning necessary to manage the fine details required for effective execution. Assessment is the culmination of the process, but this also requires ongoing activity and attention at every step in the functional process.

Assessing Campaign Effectiveness

Assessing campaign outcomes related to intangible concepts such as "deterrence" and "legitimacy" is extremely challenging. As NATO's information environment assessment capability matures, enhanced use of data science and artificial intelligence should improve the Alliance's ability to collect, analyse, assess, and visualize information linked to "Deter and Defend" outcomes.

In the interim, ACO recognizes the importance of creating campaign assessment

mindsets and processes, even if tools and techniques are imperfect. A focus on assessment causes ACO to engage in robust discussions regarding our strengths and weaknesses in the cognitive dimension. In order to assess effects, ACO needs to be crystal clear, well in advance, on what it intends to achieve around each priority military activity. This clarity of intent leads to more effective planning, tighter coordination, and the purposeful execution of activities and associated communications. Once efforts are complete, assessment illuminates where ACO information activities succeeded, and where efforts fell short of intended outcomes. Ultimately, assessment results in frank conversations on how ACO can refine, adapt and enhance our strategic communications efforts.

Visualizing Campaign Outcomes

Assessment of cognitive campaigns is a complex endeavour and results in reports that are nuanced and multifaceted. Such reporting is vital for analysts and practitioners, but senior military leaders seldom have the time to ingest long and detailed assessments. For this reason, ACO endeavours to distil assessment outcomes into succinct dashboards that highlight relevant shifts and trends in the cognitive dimension from a macro-perspective, as well

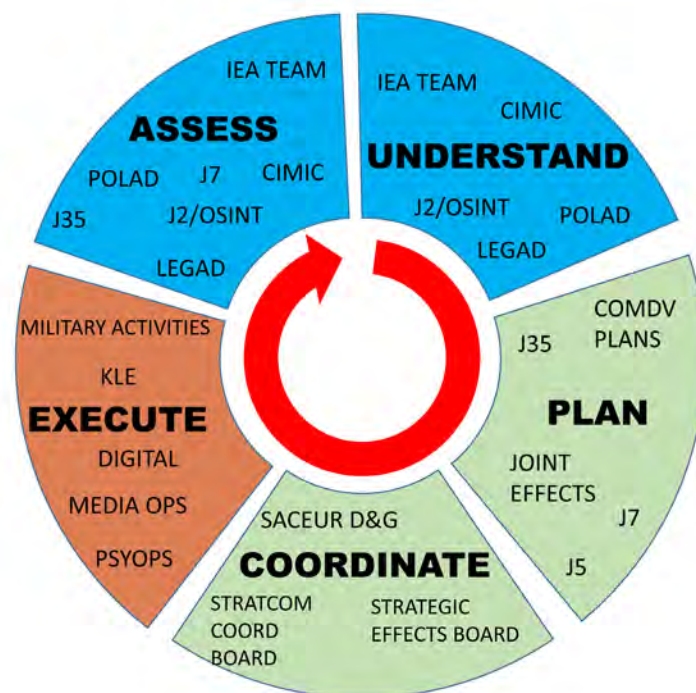


Figure 2
ACO StratCom process and functions, abbreviations and descriptions: information environment assessment (IEA); political advisor (POLAD); civil-military cooperation (CIMIC); future operations (J35); intelligence and open-source intelligence (J2/OSINT); legal advisor (LEGAD); key leader engagement (KLE); plans (J5); exercises (J7); Direction and Guidance (D&G)





ABOVE: The 2022 NATO Communicators Conference, Skopje, North Macedonia. (Clockwise) General Christopher Cavoli, SACEUR, participating in the conference via video link; Eleonora Russell, Public Affairs and Strategic Communications Advisor to the NATO Military Committee and International Military Staff; the author, ACO Director of Communications Jay H. Janzen, leading a panel discussion. Photos by SHAPE PAO

as key recommendations for ACO action.

ACO currently produces two cognitive campaign assessment dashboards each month. The first dashboard considers the entirety of the information environment, while the second dashboard focuses specifically on ACO's priority military activities. This approach recognizes that ACO could deliver significant effects around its own military activities for the month, but due to circumstances beyond its control, the Alliance could lose ground on StratCom objectives such as "assurance" or "deterrence".

For example, the deployment of a U.S. bomber task force in conjunction with Allied air-shielding activities could generate successful effects in reassuring populations regarding NATO's commitments to collective defence, while sending clear deterrence signals to adversaries. However, adversaries remain unpredictable and could, at the same moment, conduct other destabilizing actions, such as

a nuclear test, which would create simultaneous effects that may far outweigh those generated by ACO activity. This does not mean that ACO's efforts did not generate the desired effects; it simply means that they were overshadowed by other factors in the information environment. In order to appreciate the current status of the cognitive campaign and to enable broad adjustments, ACO needs to track progress of its StratCom objectives in the context of the global information environment.

ACO also needs to look more specifically at the localized delivery of effects related to its monthly priority military activities, in order to ascertain specific outcomes and fine-tune the planning, coordination and execution of future efforts. ACO's efforts regarding the assessment of its cognitive campaign are in the early stages of development, but they are already delivering insights that enhance communications efforts. As additional expertise, tools and

data sets are added to ACO's information environment assessment capability, it is expected that these efforts will become more robust and comprehensive over time.

Conclusion

Designing and implementing a StratCom campaign for ACO in support of "Deter and Defend" required 12 months of experimentation, education and reinforcement in order to reach a stage where all aspects of the system performed as intended. It also demanded a whole-of-headquarters approach, with joint functions collaborating in order to generate needed processes and synchronized outcomes.

ACO's planning cycles are long, and the array of military activity across SACEUR's AOR is vast. It is not surprising, therefore, that introducing an ACO-wide cognitive campaign required time and effort. The results have been worth the investment. ACO now has a deliberate approach to harnessing the messaging power of military activity and associated communications, which generates effects in the cognitive dimension.

All elements of ACO have clarity on SACEUR's StratCom objectives and desired effects. This improves ACO's ability to effectively allocate resources and prioritize efforts. It also enhances the unity and agility of our information activities. ACO's StratCom efforts are assessed and visualized monthly using dashboards. This activity provides benchmarks and lessons that will help us improve our campaign over time. ACO's cognitive campaign remains in the early stages of development and will require ongoing engagement and innovation in order to remain relevant.

The Communications Division at SHAPE is eager to engage with practitioners and academics who have an interest in combining powerful demonstrations of multi-domain military action, together with focused and compelling communications, in order to support the objectives of NATO's "Deter and Defend" strategy. ✦

**#StrongerTogether
#WeAreNATO
#DeterandDefend**