

“Strategic Communication” Is Vague Say What You Mean

By CHRISTOPHER PAUL

The *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* tells us that *strategic communication* consists of “[f]ocused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.”¹ This definition causes some problems. Although

it is generally reflective of prevailing thought on strategic communication, it is vague and imprecise. It is not always clear what is and what is not part of strategic communication. Worse, this definition belongs only to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD); the rest of the interagency community does not subscribe to (nor does it explicitly reject) this definition. None of the relevant interagency partners (including the U.S. Department of State, National Security Council, Broadcasting Board of Governors, U.S. Agency for International Development, and potentially others) has a formal published definition of

strategic communication (or strategic *communications*, pluralized as it is often used outside DOD). Many individual scholars and specialists have offered definitions, but these vary considerably.²

Despite this lack of an agreed definition of the term, there is a vague impression of consensus that when one of us says “strategic communication,” we all know what we are talking about, and we know that it is important. This perception of mutual meaning is in some sense correct, but the lack of a precise and agreed lexicon is preventing deeper shared understanding and making it harder to identify specific problems and solutions in this arena. The solution is simple: when talking about strategic communication, *say what you mean*.

Elsewhere, I have argued for a broad and inclusive definition of strategic communication.³ What I offer here is not in contradiction to it. At the enterprise level, I maintain that all of the actions and utterances of representatives of the U.S. Government contribute potential information and influence, and that those activities can be harnessed and synchronized in support of national or theater strategic objectives. Where I am breaking new ground is in identifying discrete elements of the strategic communication enterprise and advocating that those employing the term *immediately specify which element or elements they are talking about*.

Five Elements

I find that the term *strategic communication* is usually meant to denote one or more of five things:

- enterprise level strategic communication
- strategic communication planning, integration, and synchronization processes



GEN Petraeus explains his leadership strategy at National Press Club

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- communication strategies and themes
- communication, information, and influence capabilities
- knowledge of human dynamics and analysis or assessment capabilities.

Enterprise level strategic communication was touched on above and is “capital S, capital C” Strategic Communication. This is the commonly shared understanding of the term, and it embraces a potentially broad range of government activities and encourages their coordination toward national or theater strategic ends. This term is useful only to indicate what general activity domain a discussion is targeting and to remind everyone that all actions and utterances have information and influence potential—and that this potential can be harnessed and aligned in support of national or theater goals. Any deeper discussion of strategic communication requires a more careful specification of what, exactly, we intend to talk about.

Current DOD strategic communication cognoscenti regularly expound that “strategic communication is a process.”²⁴ The community, however, would be better served by specifying this as *strategic communication planning, integration, and synchronization processes* and by leaving the broader umbrella term in place and inclusive of other elements. “Strategic communication is a process” recognizes that enterprise level strategic communication is too broad to be meaningfully discussed as a discrete set of activities and responds to that challenge by winnowing what is included in the term to something quite specific. The problem is that others in the interagency community (and in DOD) do not understand this exclusion. They continue to talk about strategic communication more broadly (or just differently) and to be confused by this apparently narrow usage by some in DOD. Another problem is that constraining strategic communication to being *just* a process allows that process (and the term) to be used for *any* application of that process, whether that application fits within the appropriate bounds of enterprise level strategic communication or not. (This problem is discussed in greater detail below.)

As an element of the strategic communication enterprise, strategic communication planning, integration, and synchronization processes constitute a discrete set of activities and require distinct organization, procedures, and personnel. How are general national and

theater strategic goals translated into information and influence goals? How are the potentials inherent in communication capabilities incorporated into campaign plans? How are agreed communication objectives disseminated, deconflicted, and synchronized across the joint force and the interagency community? A whole host of important questions can be meaningfully asked and answered by specifying this element of strategic communication as the topic of discussion.

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Communication strategies and themes are the strategic communication element that concerns content and involves both the inputs and outputs from the strategic communication planning, integration, and synchronization processes. This includes the national or

across the joint force, especially to and for communication, information, and influence capabilities.

A focus on this element of strategic communication leads either up, demanding scrutiny of strategic goals and the communication objectives they imply, or down, considering defined objectives and candidate themes in specific operational contexts to be coordinated with and communicated by various communication, information, and influence assets.

These *communication, information, and influence capabilities* are the broadcast, dissemination, and engagement elements of strategic communication. Communication, information, and influence capabilities certainly include public affairs, psychological operations, defense support to public diplomacy, and civil affairs. These capabilities might include broader elements of the force, such as maneuver elements conducting civil-military operations or military police operating vehicle checkpoints abroad. They might include the interactions of any element of the force with foreign populations or the prevalence of language and cultural awareness training across



U.S. Air Force (Jerry Morrison)

Secretary Gates meets with Vietnamese minister of defense during Shangri-La Dialogue

campaign goals or objectives (inputs) that planning processes will translate into communication goals and themes (outputs) and incorporate into plans. Content outputs, such as communication objectives and themes, are the elements integrated and synchronized

the force. They might include every action or utterance of every deployed Servicemember. Wherever we bound this element of strategic communication, by first specifying that we are talking about communication and engagement capabilities and then indicating which of

them we wish to discuss, we will have framed the conversation in such a way that everyone understands what we are talking about.

Discussions surrounding this strategic communication element focus on the ability of various assets to design and disseminate messages and engage foreign populations in different cultural contexts, as well as the different forms of communication available to the joint force, given that actions speak louder than words. What training in language skills, cultural awareness, and influence do these force elements have? What doctrine guides their employment? What is the broadcast reach and range of available media? How rapidly can adversary mis- or disinformation be countered? Which needed capabilities are organic to the joint force and which must be contracted out?

audiences specifically and human dynamics generally is critical to identifying themes, messages, and engagement approaches that will lead to desired outcomes. Data collection and assessment contribute the feedback that allows two-way communication and engagement (rather than just broadcast) and that also makes it possible to demonstrate and report impact or effect from communication activities.

These five specifications connect to each other logically. Within the broader *strategic communication enterprise*, national or campaign level goals and objectives constitute the inputs to the *strategic communication planning, integration, and synchronization processes*. Based on *knowledge of human dynamics and analysis or assessment capabilities*, these processes transform and incorporate

communication, information, and influence capabilities are the broadcast, dissemination, and engagement elements of strategic communication



Publicly funded Arabic-language Radio Sawa broadcasts news, information, and entertainment throughout Middle East

Broadcasting Board of Governors

Supporting all of these specified activities are *knowledge of human dynamics and analysis or assessment capabilities*. These capabilities include media monitoring, media use pattern research, target audience analysis, and social, historical, cultural, and language expertise, along with other relevant analytic and assessment capabilities. Cultural knowledge and audience analysis are critical for translating broad strategic goals into information and influence goals. Understanding

the *communication strategies and themes* and provide them to commanders who employ the various available *communication, information, and influence capabilities* in pursuit of desired objectives. The planning, integration, and synchronization processes and knowledge, analysis, and assessment capabilities continue to be useful to force elements as they broadcast or disseminate their themes and messages or otherwise engage and appraise the impact of these activities.

Should these five specifying elements *not* cover the aspect of strategic communication we want to talk about, that is okay. Just be sure to specify what we *are* talking about more precisely than simply “strategic communication.” Unless, of course, we really mean something else.

Resist Degeneration of the Term

Unfortunately, much gets called “strategic communication” that should not. When I say that I am an advocate of a broad, inclusive interpretation of strategic communication, I mean that I prefer an expansive view of the things that should be considered communication, information, and influence capabilities, *not* that I am open to a broad interpretation of the types of goals and objectives strategic communication can be used to support. While the *communication strategies and themes* element does include the goals or objectives to be supported, the goals must always be related to national or theater campaign goals. While the vague definition from the DOD dictionary is of little help in making this explicit and clear, the host of reports, discussion, and predoctrine on the subject do make the purpose of strategic communication perfectly unambiguous: “to harness information to protect and promote *national* interests [emphasis added].”⁵ Strategic communication is intended to be a whole-of-government approach to challenges faced by the Nation, not a generic term for thoughtful planning and coordination of communication in pursuit of parochial interests.

Many in the broader defense community have begun to harness the processes of (and the term) strategic communication in pursuit of their narrow organizational interests. I have now seen several military Service-specific “strategic communication plans” that lay out communication goals related to informing Servicemembers and their families, protecting the reputation of the Service, telling the Service’s “story,” and maintaining public (and congressional) support for the Service. Similarly, several subordinate defense organizations and offices now have strategic communication plans that focus on communicating effectively with and generating support from other offices and entities in DOD.

I reject this misuse of the term *strategic communication*, and I urge everyone to do the same. This is not to say that being thoughtful about communication in a broader range of

contexts is bad—it is not. Nor is it to say that the Services and other defense organizations should not organize and coordinate communication efforts in pursuit of their institutional interests—they should. What they should *not* do is call that pursuit strategic communication. Communicating strategically is not the same as strategic communication.

Part of the problem is that “strategic communication” is sometimes used in this diluted way in the business world, where the term *strategic* is regularly attached to a multitude of other terms without really adding any meaning. Part of the problem also stems from the vague DOD dictionary definition, which, while intended to point toward national level objectives, simply specifies “United States Government interests, policies, and objec-

tives.” This could be narrowly interpreted as the interests of any part of the U.S. Government rather than all of it, thus encompassing the parochial interests of any government office or organization. Furthermore, the assertion that “strategic communication is a process” does nothing to prevent this degeneration because it implies that any effort to plan, integrate, and synchronize communication could follow a strategic communication–like process and thus *be* strategic communication.

In industry and in other defense establishments around the world, these not-strategic communications are called “corporate communications.” This set of activities is sometimes productively divided into internal and external corporate communication to indicate whether the organiza-

tion is communicating inside itself or with external stakeholders or publics. This term is completely appropriate for planned and coordinated communication activities in pursuit of the institutional goals of a Service or other defense office or organization. One could even have a corporate communication strategy laying out the goals and planning guidance for the organization—only it should not be called strategic communication.

When in doubt as to whether a set of goals might be legitimately conceived as serving national or theater objectives and thus belong under the rubric of strategic communication, try the following test. If we were to try to coordinate or synchronize our communication related to this goal with a partner outside our organization (in the interagency, say), would they share our goal? If not, the goal is probably below the objective threshold implied by strategic communication.

At the end of the day, remember that all communication is *not* strategic communication. Do not be afraid to assert, “That’s not strategic communication that you are talking about!” It may be communication, it may require planning or coordination, and it may be important to an organization. We can still talk about it. Say what you mean, but please don’t call it strategic communication if it isn’t.

JFQ

NOTES

¹ Joint Publication 1–02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, April 12, 2001, as amended through March 17, 2009), 524.

² See the discussion in Christopher Paul, *Whither Strategic Communication? A Survey of Current Proposals and Recommendations*, OP–250–RC (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009).

³ *Ibid.*; and Todd C. Helmus, Christopher Paul, and Russell W. Glenn, *Enlisting Madison Avenue: The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular Support in Theaters of Operation*, MG–607–JFCOM (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007).

⁴ For formal documented examples of this line of thinking, see Charles S. Gramaglia, “Strategic Communication: Distortion and White Noise,” *IOSphere* (Winter 2008); and Dennis M. Murphy, *The Trouble with Strategic Communication(s)* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, January 2008).

⁵ Jeffrey B. Jones, “Strategic Communication: A Mandate for the United States,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 39 (4th Quarter 2005), 108.



Strategic communication director for Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa in Tanga, Tanzania, speaks at dedication of renovated medical clinic funded by task force and U.S. Africa Command