

Strategic Communication in the Department of Defense: A Continuous Process

By Fred Lash, APR
Office of the Secretary of
Defense for Public Affairs

With the publishing of the “2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Strategic Communication Execution Roadmap” in September 2006, a watershed event occurred—the Deputy Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed on a definition of the **Strategic Communication Process** and how it is to be incorporated into the **initial** stages of operational planning.

In essence, they concurred Strategic Communication is to be defined as “Focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power.”

In subsequent program review briefings to the Deputy’s Advisory Working Group to obtain approval for funding recom-

mended actions contained in the Roadmap, the Deputy Secretary of Defense asked that a Strategic Communication Concept of Operations be developed.

Concept of Operations

Consequently, not long after this Execution Roadmap was approved and promulgated, a **Strategic Communication Concept of Operations** (CONOPS) was also developed, coordinated with all applicable parties, approved by the Deputy Secretary of Defense and widely distributed. It establishes a framework and a proven construct, based on operational planning processes.

Whereas the “old school of thought” placed communication planning (usually titled “public affairs”) somewhere near the Execution Phase, the new school of strategic communication planning identifies those combinations of kinetic and non-kinetic actions and words that are most likely to produce the desired understanding and actions by key audiences.

Because of this placement, the **Strategic Communication Proc-**

ess helps synchronize those lines of operation that need to be engaged. Furthermore, the Department of Defense must contribute to this effort by strengthening Strategic Communication processes in its organizational culture.

To this end, the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff are developing a staff process that integrates and supports Strategic Communication initiatives among the Combatant Commands and other elements of the Department of Defense, while enhancing alignment with broader USG policies, plans and actions.

Philosophy of Strategic Communication

The focus of Strategic Communication is always on understanding and affecting key audiences in ways that are critical to our operational success.

Achieving those successes requires a wide range of capabilities to work together from the inception of a strategic, operational, or tactical requirement.

The process is continuous and integrated from the beginning of

each operational planning cycle. The Strategic Communication cycle moves much faster and can repeat itself several times during the course of the operational planning cycle.

Strategic Communication begins with taking U.S. government policy and consistently applying it to **what we say** and **what we do**.

When what we say and what we do is not synchronized or is not consistent with the policy, a “Say — Do Gap” is created, our efforts are not maximized, and the desired effect is perhaps not achieved, and the disconnect adversely affects our credibility as a military force and as a nation.

When people have spoken in the past about communication, they have usually focused on the Informational Element of National Power, and have considered it as the main driver toward Strategic Communication effects.

But in Strategic Communication, we acknowledge the interdependency of Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME) elements.

True Strategic Communication seizes upon the great power of the integration and synchronization of the DIME. Strategic Communication provides a **process** to integrate and synchronize

the effort, affecting the way we work to achieve desired effects.

Inside the military we ensure that our roles in the DIME are integrated and synchronized internally, and that we are prepared to integrate and synchronize those efforts in the interagency and coalition SC process.

Through the SC process, we help our nation achieve desired SC effects, either independently or in concert with other nations, intergovernmental organizations and/or nongovernmental organizations.

The Four-Phase Process

1. Analysis — Akin to intelligence, it can be collected in advance of serious contemplation of action, but becomes more deliberate and focused as situational requirements arise. Research is focused on the commander’s intent and desired effects.

Those must shape all phases of the SC process. During this research phase, we attempt to understand our audiences and their environment, how they think, what they believe and how they routinely receive information upon which they trust and act.

In other words, what it takes, including kinetic and nonkinetic

actions, to create desired effects. Reach-back capabilities may be a key contributor toward optimizing the resources required of a Combatant Command or Joint Task Force to perform the needed research.

2. Plan — Desired effects prompt planners to develop kinetic and non-kinetic Courses of Action (COAs) that meet the commander’s intent.

Planning will include branches and sequels designed to seize opportunities and adjust execution as assessments deem necessary.

Planning can be done both within the individual lines of operation and collaboratively between lines of operation; however, it must be integrated and synchronized within boards and cells comprising all participants.

This enhances the creation of a better overall design, intended to produce desired effects on target audiences.

3. Execute — Both kinetic and non-kinetic operations are conducted across lines of operation in an integrated and synchronized manner, in accordance with the plan, in order to produce desired effects.

Not all lines of operation will

be involved in every instance, and different lines will be more active than others at various times.

4. Assessment — This phase begins upon execution and is continuous throughout the operation, and consists of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The assessment must determine if we are achieving our assigned objectives and effects, and whether or not we are measuring correctly. After analyzing the results, we must reassess assigned plans and tasks, and possibly recycle them back to policy development.

Based on the assessment, the research, planning and execution for any follow-on operations can be adjusted or modified, in an effort to ensure that we are producing the commander's desired effects, goals, and objectives.

Integration into Lines of Operations

Various lines of operation are part of an integrated and synchronized plan to obtain desired effects to support our national policies.

The intent is to orchestrate appropriate elements of national power through synchronized lines of operation to influence the behavior of the target audience(s).

The exact timing, sequencing and content will always be situational. Effects assessment should occur within execution in order to seize opportunities and adjust intended effects.

The **Concept of Operations for Strategic Communication** takes into account that this synchronization occurs in organizations that are composed of these lines of operation.

Establishment of the Strategic Communication Integration Group

After having approved the **Concept of Operations for Strategic Communication**, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Gordon England, formally established the Strategic Communication Integration Group (SCIG) to recommend, coordinate, and oversee DoD strategic communication initiatives and plans for the Department of Defense.

In overseeing the strategic communication efforts that he had designated, the Deputy Secretary of Defense tasked the SCIG Secretariat to ensure products produced by Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Combatant Commanders and the

Services are coordinated and synchronized across the department.

The organization of the SCIG is designed for both efficiency and for ensuring all equities are represented. The SCIG consists of senior representatives from Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, Military Services, U.S. Special Operations Command, Joint Forces Command, Strategic Command, and may include other DoD or interagency organizations which will be invited as appropriate.

An Executive Committee, consisting of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Legislative Affairs), Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Policy), the Director of the Joint Staff and the Director of Strategic Communication (Joint Staff), will provide oversight and guidance to the SCIG Secretariat Director. Subject-matter experts for specific strategic communication initiatives are to be temporarily provided to the Secretariat for specific projects.

In addition to his position as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Joint Communication), Rear Admiral Frank Thorp has been designated to serve as the SCIG Secretariat Director.

The Future of Strategic Communication

Lastly, it is important to note that the military element of Strategic Communication cannot be overemphasized. The ability for the military commander to promulgate information influencing and informing selected audiences in today's complex environment is a critical element to successful operations.

Whereas it is encouraging to see them developing communication strategies that are fully nested

with higher national-level strategic communication objectives to get their messages out to the various target audiences, there is still a long way to go in fully integrating these thought processes into joint planning efforts, especially during the early phases.

It would be well for military leaders and defense officials to follow in the path of both the Deputy Secretary of Defense and the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, who have come to understand the vast importance of **Strategic Communication**.

About the author ...

Fred Lash, APR, has more than 25 years of experience in strategic communication, media relation, and public affairs.

He is a former Marine Corps public affairs officer and, as a career civilian in the Federal government, has served in the Departments of Energy and Defense, National Security Agency and Naval Sea Systems Command.

A graduate of American University (Master of Science in public relations), Lash is currently an advisor to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Joint Communication at the Pentagon. He is a member of the Public Relations Society of America's Military and Public Safety Section.

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