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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN A CHANGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Abstract

This paper is focused on the comprehensive approach to defining the Strategic Communication concept. During the research process the author has identified that the term is often misunderstood, even while used by communication professionals. The definition is based on the publications in available literature, documents and the personal interviews the author conducted with Strategic Communication experts from NATO, the US, the UK and Poland. The analysis included in the paper describes Strategic Communication as a process and as a tool. It also points out the differences in practical and academic approaches. The author also described the origins of the term in the military domain. The proposed definition of Strategic Communication can be used for further research not only on Strategic Communication but also on any other military communication domain like Public Affairs, Information Operations or Psychological Operations.

Keywords: strategic communication • communication • information environment • NATO • Polish Armed Forces

KOMUNIKACJA STRATEGICZNA W ZMIENIAJĄCYM SIĘ ŚRODOWISKU BEZPIECZEŃSTWA

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia kompleksowe podejście do kwestii teorii i praktyki Komunikacji Strategicznej. W czasie swoich badań autor zidentyfikował częste błędy znaczeniowe, jakich dopuszczają się nawet osoby pro-

fesjonalnie zajmujące się komunikacją. Definicja jest oparta na publikacjach w dostępnej literaturze, dokumentach oraz na wywiadach eksperckich przeprowadzonych przez autora ze specjalistami Komunikacji Strategicznej z NATO, Stanów Zjednoczonych, Wielkiej Brytanii i Polski. Analiza zawarta w artykule opisuje Komunikację Strategiczną jako proces i jako narzędzie. Uwypukla również różnice w podejściu akademickim i użytkowym. Autor opisał również pochodzenie pojęcia Komunikacji Strategicznej w środowisku wojskowym. Zaproponowana definicja Komunikacji Strategicznej może być wykorzystywana nie tylko w dalszych badaniach nad Komunikacją Strategiczną, ale również w badaniach nad poszczególnymi wojskowymi domenami komunikacyjnymi, jak Komunikacja Społeczna (*Public Affairs*), Operacje Informacyjne i Operacje Psychologiczne.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja Strategiczna • komunikacja • środowisko Informacyjne • NATO • Siły Zbrojne RP

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Although the Strategic Communication (StratCom) is a well-known term at least since the beginning of the millennium, it has recently become one of the most popular fields of research and activity in the defence domain. It's caused by the current situation in the international security system and a simple fact that today, in the 24/7 news cycle containing 360° social media live coverage, everything, even a conflict with clear indications of a regular war, is a matter of perspective. Ambiguity of perception brings ambiguity of actions and this, in the worst-case scenario, leads to conducting wars without even starting them.

However, the ambiguity was always in place, when it came to defining crises and conflicts. What is changed, is the global Information Environment. Today, when an ordinary citizen can discuss his issues with a President via Twitter or a single photo can become viral and change the mindset of a population, the perception of actions portrayed in the information domain may lead to legitimization of illegal actions, even on the largest scale. The challenge lies not with the truth, but with communicating the truth. In the end, it's not about being accurate, truthful and precise, it's about being credible.

Credibility is the ultimate goal for all communicators, however actually it doesn't depend fully on the professionalism of communicating actions, it depends mostly on the perception of audiences. The audience brings a variable to the communication equation, which is highly difficult to assess. Credibility is not easy to gain and it's hard to maintain, especially for the defence domain, where sometimes the actors use operational methods of influence to undermine the opponent. StratCom is perceived as the key capability for the defence systems in democratic countries to counter such methods.

Strategic Communication as a process

StratCom is not the primary activity within the defence system. It's important, sometimes crucial, but the main product of the defence systems lies with safety and security. The military must be prepared to physically counter the threat, not to talk its way out of it. This obvious fact allows to understand the challenges of the defence systems when it comes to prioritization of constantly limited resources and answers the question, why adaptation of the idea of StratCom was never meant to create a new capability. It is possible, that it was an incorrect approach, however at the beginning the StratCom was designed to be a coordination process.

James P. Farwell in his *Persuasion and Power. The Art of Strategic Communication* shows the origins of military view on StratCom. At the beginning the idea was „originated in 2002¹ in the office of then – Brigadier General Jack Catton at the Pentagon”². According to the senior information policy and strategy advisor to the Joint Staff Ted Tzavellas cited by Farwell, „at its inception, *Strategic Communication* was simply intended to

¹ The phrase „Strategic Communication” was used earlier in 2001 by Vince Vitto, Chairmen of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination, however it's not clear if it was used in the meaning as it is discussed within this paper – *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination*, Washington D.C., October 2001.

² J.P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power. The Art of Strategic Communication*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, 2012. Kindle e-book.

*bring practitioners of Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy, Information Operations, et all to the same table for them to independently pursue what they were each skilled at doing, but to do so under a harmony of interests and with knowledge of each other's activities"*³.

Today, most commonly used definition comes from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization policy, and it's *„the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs (MPA), Information Operations (InfoOps) and Psychological Operations (PsyOps), as appropriate – in support of alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO aims"*⁴. This definition supports the approach, that StratCom is the process of coordination communication activities.

In that meaning the name of StratCom can be misleading, because it shows a function, which actually isn't „strategic” and theoretically isn't „communication”. NATO Strategic Communications Policy refers to political and strategic level and based on that document, the strategic level documents were developed. The military concept issued by Allied Command Transformation in 2010⁵ and the military policy issued by Allied Command Operations (SHAPE) in 2012⁶ refer to the operational with some areas reserved for the tactical level.

Per the NATO policy it's also not „communication”, because it's rather a process of communication activities coordination. In the spirit of the document the capabilities or functions like Public Affairs, Information Operations or Psychological Operations, retain their functional capability within their domains. StratCom is then not about directing these capabilities; it's about making sure that they all operate within the same framework.

A similar approach is presented by the Department of Defense Report on Strategic Communications, where the authors suggest that „the StratCom should be viewed as a process rather than as

³ Ibidem.

⁴ PO(2009)0141, *NATO Strategic Communications Policy*, NATO HQ, Brussels, 29 September 2009.

⁵ MCM-0085-2010 Revised, *Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communications*, 11 Aug 2010.

⁶ ACO Directive (AD) 95-2 *ACO Strategic Communications*, 21 May 2012.

a set of capabilities, organisations, or discrete activities”⁷. This fact supports the approach taken by the authors of *Strategic Communications Joint Integration Concept* where the process is described as „the alignment of multiple lines of operation (e.g., policy implementation, Public Affairs, force movement, Information Operations etc.) that together generate effects to support national objectives”⁸.

The U.S. Army War College in its *Information Operations Primer* goes considerably further in defining StratCom as a process, by stressing that it’s „the orchestration of actions, images, and words to achieve desired effects”⁹. The publication points out that the aim is to “close the say-do gap”¹⁰, what is being often perceived as the primary task for any coordination process concerning communication activity, basically stressing that the actions should follow the words and that the actions usually speak louder than words. Additionally, the publication expands the meaning of information and communication as part of strategy, planning and policy development since the early stages of these processes. It underscores the impact of communication assessment in the preparatory phase of any actions and considers „soft power” capabilities as equal to kinetic capabilities, when the course of action is being determined. What is remarkable about this definition is that it stresses the horizontal and vertical aspects of coordination, describing the process as both across the Department of Defense and the government, which as appropriate includes international partners, and top-down / bottom-up within the chain of command.

The analysis of these definitions brings few conclusions useful for further discussions about StratCom. The communication domain in the defence system is usually under-resourced. Additional structures and tools come with additional spending and the cost of a process is usually very limited. One could argue

⁷ *Department of Defense Report on Strategic Communication December 2009*, Washington, DC, 11 Feb 2010.

⁸ *Joint Staff Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept*, Washington, DC, 7 Oct 2009.

⁹ D.M. Murphy, *Strategic Communication*, U.S. Army War College, Information Operations Primer, Carlisle, November 2009.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

about the added value of another process, which in the end should be conducted within the already existing structural coordination processes of the entire organisation. However, especially in the military domain, the focus on communication activity, which has completely different character, than the primary purpose identified for the military domain, requires additional effort.

Implementation of the idea of StratCom as a process brings very limited costs. Usually it's just few staff officers, designated personnel, whose primary task is to steer the communication aspect of organisational activity. Since it's a clear leadership function, this cell is subordinated to the leadership and provides advisory functions. The clear advantage of this solution is the recognition of functional responsibilities, that the coordinated communication capabilities and functions carry. StratCom in this setup is not taking over the communication in the organisation, it's just maximizing its effects¹¹.

All functional areas, Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy, Information Operations, Psychological Operations, or following the U.S. approach, which also recognizes Defense Support to Public Diplomacy, Military Diplomacy and Visual Information, retain lead role in their domain. At first glance, it may look inefficient, in the military, very hierarchic system, however this approach is allowing avoiding structures duplications.

To direct all functional areas mentioned in the previous paragraph, there would be a need of building additional structures, which would partially take over the responsibilities from those areas. This would not only increase costs, but also build communication superstructure that would blur the responsibilities. The character of each functional area is significantly different, they all operate in specific surroundings, bringing different sensitivities in the communication work. The idea of StratCom being a process is admitting that orchestra conductor doesn't have to know how to play on each and single instrument.

¹¹ This is a typical situation in the higher NATO headquarters – SHAPE and joint force commands in Brunssum and in Naples. This is also the case for NATO Response Force – author's assessment based on personal experience.

This approach to StratCom is built on a simple assumption, that all functional areas have a perfectly working structures and the only area of support they need is to build a framework within which they should operate, based on the directions and guidance from the leadership. So, in other words, to coordinate horizontally, what is being orchestrated vertically.

Christopher Paul identified however few challenges to this setup of StratCom. First, this approach could be misunderstood by other structures in the organisation, especially in the military domain, where StratCom is usually treated as a capability. Additionally, the process of coordination can be misinterpreted and used for coordination of the activities that are not within the Information Environment, and finally how to allocate resources for StratCom development if it's just a process¹².

Strategic Communication as a capability

The defence system, especially the military part of it, is a very structured domain. The idea of coordination process that touches several areas of responsibility without directing them, can be misleading in a typical headquarters or institution, where usually there is a structure responsible for each function and capability. This structure is usually subordinated in the chain of command to the central figure in the overarching structure (like a chief of staff). Very often StratCom is perceived as a similar idea which area of responsibility lies with communication.

The source of such perception is very often in general definitions that describe the meaning of the term without giving specifics of the sensitivities behind it. *The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* explains that StratCom is „focused 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 using coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products

¹² C. Paul, *Strategic Communication, Origins, Concepts, and Current Debate*, Santa Barbara, California, 2011, Kindle e-book.

synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power”¹³.

In 2008 the Defense Science Board Task Force On Strategic Communication in its report proposed a holistic approach to the discussed definition. Starting from stating that „Strategic Communication is an integrated process that includes the development, implementation, assessment, and evolution of public actions and messages in support of policies, interests, and long-term goals”¹⁴. Only this sentence gives a perception, that all communication activities including the ones conducted indirectly¹⁵, fall not only under StratCom umbrella. They fall into a clear leadership process, where StratCom is treated as a function to direct and control all others.

These definitions clearly underscore the overarching role of StratCom over all communication capabilities and functions. Commander Steve Tatham goes even further and describes StratCom as „a systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behavior”¹⁶. This approach is actually treating StratCom as a superior form of communication activities which assumes, that the usual forms like Information Operations or Public Diplomacy were not meeting the levels of ambition for effectiveness.

Despite the structural difficulties with grouping separate functions identified usually as part of StratCom, the efforts are made to create communication superstructures, the leader of which is no longer an advisor to the commander. This person is usually at the same level in the overall structure as commanders/chiefs responsible for main domains, like for the

¹³ *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, p.226, Washington D.C., 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 February 2016).

¹⁴ *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, Washington D.C., January 2008. p. 13.

¹⁵ Indirect use the author understands as activities which communicate, however were not designed for communication purposes.

¹⁶ S. Tatham, *Strategic Communications: A Primer*, Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Special Series 08/28, December 2008, p. 14.

usual headquarters the operations, planning, intelligence or logistics.

This approach seems reasonable for all practitioners who notice the added value in the simplicity of structure. Military world is usually very hierarchic and there is a minimal level of tolerance for all deviations to this state. It is important to investigate the reasons of the differences in documents and dispersions of structures. Each capability and function has a specific role in the part of the structure it's in and its placement there is not coincidental. In NATO the Strategic Communication Advisor and Public Affairs Advisor are usually very high in it, subordinated directly to the command group and Information Operations and Psychological Operations are placed deep within the operational structure.

There is a simple reason to all of this. As it was already mentioned, the primary role of the military is not to communicate, it's to prepare for war or to fight a war. Within the foreseen operation, one of the tasks of the military is to win the battle in the Information Environment. It has many tools to do it, however the main ones are the coordinating function – Information Operations and a capability to win hearts and minds – Psychological Operations. They are both designed to win a war in the Information Environment and to do it, they can use all means possible, all means foreseen for conducting an operation. And both Information Operations and Psychological Operations specialize in this domain. However, to be part of a wider effort they function within the operational structure to nest itself in the part of the headquarters responsible for conducting the operation.

On the other hand, the commander has his advisors, who deal with areas not reserved only for the military domain like Public Affairs and StratCom¹⁷. The first one is there to be enable the active communication with the outer and inner environment and the second one is there to coordinate all activities with communication potential, like engagements of the commander, display of forces, all that falls into Public Affairs and within the

¹⁷ The list of usual advisors is much longer and it contains Financial Advisor, Legal Advisor, Medical Advisor, Political Advisor etc. – author's remark.

operation, also the two previously mentioned Information Operations and Psychological Operations.

The idea of combining these very different functions and capabilities into one structure brings a lot of difficulties in the field of doctrines, specific character and needs etc. However, it obviously brings many advantages. It's mostly connected with the communication domain not being the primary one in the military world and that usually means very limited budget capabilities and lack of man power. All the communication activities usually follow the same process which combines analysis, planning, execution and evaluation phases. Except the vital part, the execution, all other may be shared using this way the resources and personnel more effectively. The model of communications directorate functioned throughout the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) operation. In the recently published report *We have met the enemy and he is us* Bret Boudreau underlines, that StratCom structure led by a general officer elicits better outcomes than alternative structures¹⁸.

Strategic Communication – all and more

Taking into consideration that there are advantages of both approaches to StratCom – as a process or as a capability – combination of both approaches seems like an obvious assumption.

In 2010 White House issued *National Framework for Strategic Communication*. At the beginning of the paper the authors decided to stress that due to many interpretations, the term StratCom should be properly described. The simple definition refers to „(a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aiming at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by Public

¹⁸ B. Boudreau, *We have met the enemy and he is us*, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, Riga, 2016, p. 35.

Affairs, Public Diplomacy, and information operation professionals”¹⁹.

Also, the Polish Ministry of Defence definition, which was created four years later, although literally sounds like a typical „StratCom as a capability” definition, gives a clear understanding that it’s also, or even primarily the process. The Polish definition says: „Strategic Communications comprises intentional and coordinated communication activities, accomplished at all levels of command and management, both in political and military dimension, directed both inside and outside the Ministry of National Defence, serving the achievement of strategic objectives of MOD in national, allied and coalition sphere”.²⁰ In the part of the document, which is describing the justification of the Polish Ministry of National Defence Strategic Communication, it’s clearly emphasized, that the definition refers mainly to the coordination function recognizing that it’s also about actually conducting the communication, where the authority for directing the communication functions and capabilities lays with appointed actors.

A similar approach was suggested lately by the military part of NATO. Military Committee Policy on StratCom is being developed in recent months. The intention of military planners in the Alliance is to combine the idea of coordinating process with a capability to jointly plan, analyze and asses the communication capabilities. All this is completed with the assumption that the different communication functions will retain its execution authority. The final definition of NATO’s Military Policy on StratCom is still unknown, however the direction looks quite comprehensive.

¹⁹ *White House National Framework for Strategic Communication*, Washington D.C., 2010, p. 4.

²⁰ Decision of the Minister of Defence number 478/MON *w sprawie systemu komunikacji strategicznej w resorcie obrony narodowej [on strategic communications system in the Ministry of National Defence]*, Polish MOD, Warsaw, 8 December 2014, not published, available in the Polish MOD on request.

Strategic Communication – practitioners' approach

Theoretical approach to StratCom definition doesn't solve the question on which this paper needs to answer. The author asked the most influential StratCom practitioners to provide their view on Strategic Communication.

Oana Lungescu, NATO Spokesperson states, that *„NATO has a very clear definition, which is the 2009 Strategic Communications Policy, which is short, simple and to the point. It makes it clear that Strategic Communications is a coordination function, rather than a capability or a bureaucracy and I think it's important for us to keep in mind. In the end, Strategic Communications is a sum total of what we do in a coordinated fashion across all the five disciplines, Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, both military and civilian, PsyOps and InfoOps and I think what is really important is that we don't go into a direction of a divorce between civilian and military communication”*²¹.

Another representative of the NATO structure, Mark Laity, Chief Strategic Communications at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), reminds, *„that there are different levels of definition which are acceptable. You have the institutional levels, which are different from the more intellectual or functional levels. (...) The definition that we have in the proposed Military Committee Policy*²² *(...) is, I think very good institutional definition. Because what it highlights, is the need to take all of the communication disciplines and integrate the information line of effort with everything else that is happening to produce effects”*²³.

However, some experts stress that the true definition should go deeper. Christopher Riley, Head of Strategic Communications Team and Principal Editor at NATO Headquarters Public

²¹ Personal interview with Ms Oana Lungescu conducted in April 2016.

²² StratCom, in the context of the NATO military, is the integration of communication capabilities and information Staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the Information Environment (IE), in support of NATO aims and objectives. – *MC 0628 – NATO Military Policy on Strategic Communications*, third interim draft, NATO IMS, Brussels, 17 May 2016, NATO internal document, not published, at the disposal of the author of the dissertation.

²³ Personal interview with Mr. Mark Laity conducted in April 2016.

Diplomacy Division simplifies that StratCom is „*a process where by your communications effort leads to a measurable change of behavior. There is a lot of discussion about whether or not the attitudinal change is sufficient, because you can measure attitudinal change, sentiment change, but I think, for me, if I would get to the key elements of StratCom, it's about approaching communications challenge in the same way you would approach any military challenge*”²⁴.

The typically national approach in author's opinion is presented by Navy Captain Gregory L. Hicks, Special Assistant for Public Affairs to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who admits, that „*for U.S., where we've evolved to, is less a function and more of a process. Strategic Communication is trying to align communication efforts to mitigate any say-do gaps, so that actions match words and where I have been practicing to taken it, is to make sure that what we produce or what we say is the right person, the right place, the right time with the right message to the right audience*”²⁵.

By bringing the question to the Polish ground, the author intended to gain a typically national approach. The person responsible for current StratCom of the Polish MOD, Anna Pacholska, Chief StratCom Branch of the Operational Centre of the Minister of National Defence brings the definition of the Polish MOD to the table, as she was the one leading the process to draft it, stating that this definition comes from combining practitioners and academics approach²⁶.

The operational approach is represented by Mr Andrzej Malik, the StratCom Advisor to the Chief of General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces, who explains that „*Strategic Communication is coordinated actions, messages, images, and other form of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of your objectives. It should be noticed, that this definition doesn't contain the tools (Military PD, Military PA,*

²⁴ Personal interview with Mr. Chris Riley conducted in April 2016.

²⁵ Personal interview w with Navy Capt Gregory L. Hicks conducted in April 2016.

²⁶ Personal interview with Mrs. Anna Pacholska conducted in April 2016.

*InfoOps and PsyOps) and it doesn't speak about the need the internally coordinate among them*²⁷.

The comprehensive view on StratCom is given by Lt Col Dariusz Niedzielski, Warsaw Summit Liaison Officer with the office of Public Affairs and Strategic Communication Advisor (PASCAD) to the Chairman of the Military Committee (CMC), who stresses that „*StratCom is first and foremost a capability that encompasses all communication and information activities planned and conducted in Information Environment. It essentially comprises of Public Affairs (including Military Public Affairs), Information Operations and Psychological Operations but may also include Civil-Military Cooperation or Civil-Military Interaction. It combines also kinetic and non-kinetic activities with the aim of achieving the objectives in the Information Environment. Effectively, it requires close co-operation with the intelligence and cyber communities as well as other capabilities and staff functions*”²⁸.

Concluding remarks regarding the definition

After introducing and analyzing all definitions and aspects of Strategic Communication, the first conclusion to make is that most probably no definition can satisfy all experts, practitioner and researchers.

StratCom is a capability of the entire organisation to achieve consistency and integrity in the communication effort. It's a mindset that needs to be incorporated in the entire organisation, which is driven by a range of processes and structures facilitating the coordination and synchronization of communication. StratCom is empowered with tools, manning and resources to conduct full communication planning cycle, which consists of 4 main phases: analysis to understand the Information Environment in all aspects, planning as a part of everyday business and operational planning process, execution of active and passive communication measures and evaluation of the entire

²⁷ Personal interview with Mr. Andrzej Malik conducted in April 2016.

²⁸ Personal interview with LTC Dariusz Niedzielski conducted in May 2016.

system in terms of structural, procedural and functional assessment.

The importance of StratCom lays in the cross-organisational competence of the domain. It's covering a wide range of activities, starting from more typical ones, like Public Affairs and Engagements, which are connected to the „communicate” nature of StratCom. Going through the operational functions and capabilities, like Information Operations and Psychological Operations which place a set of communication measures in the military operational domain with the primary aim to achieve effects (kinetic and non-kinetic, lethal and non-lethal) on the adversary. Finishing with all other aspects of organisational activities that may have an impact on the communication domain, which can be triggered by the senior leadership as well as all other levels of activities including the single employee.

On top of the above-mentioned conclusions it needs to be acknowledged that the military domain in the peace time has a specific posture, because it can't use its full potential if there is no decision on conducting military measures against adversary or even a potential adversary. However, in times of hybrid threat and many ambiguities involved in defining the critical moment to use the military force, it needs to be recognized that with a specific, detailed and effective directions and guidance the military communication potential can be used in any circumstances. StratCom is perceived as the key capability for the defence systems in democratic countries to counter methods used by non-democratic countries in the Information Environment.

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