

NATO strategic communications – An evolving battle of narratives

SUMMARY

NATO had for decades focused mainly on hard power while information aspects played a complementary but less visible role in its activity. However, the failure of the NATO forces to generate public support in Afghanistan highlighted the limitations of traditional military operations and set the Alliance on the road to developing a strategic communications (StratCom) concept.

Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine and its illegal annexation of Crimea forced NATO to respond to a new reality and sparked a number of questions about its current approach, not least regarding StratCom's allegedly weak position within the Alliance.

Meanwhile, the NATO-accredited Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, established in 2014, contributes to the Alliance's communication efforts and works as a 'hub for debate' across various StratCom disciplines.

In the face of increasingly aggressive propaganda campaigns from adversaries in the east (Russia) and the south (primarily ISIL/Da'esh), cooperation between NATO and the EU is set to increase.



In this briefing:

- Strategy and aims
- Roles and responsibilities
- Adapting to evolving adversaries
- Lessons learned
- NATO and EU StratCom cooperation

Strategic communications according to NATO

NATO [defines](#) its strategic communications (StratCom) as 'the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities — Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (IO) and Psychological Operations — as appropriate in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims.', (PO(2009)0141, 29 September 2009).

Strategy and aims**From Afghanistan to Ukraine and Russia: Communicating the mission**

Hard military power had for a long time been at the heart of NATO's activity while communication strategies featured mostly in the background. However, as NATO forces' [inability](#) to gain the support of the Afghan population' exposed the limitations of conventional military power, the Alliance [created](#) a StratCom cell at its [Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe](#) (SHAPE) in 2007 and embarked on developing its StratCom concept in 2009.

Allies at the 2009 NATO Summit in Strasbourg/Kehl [declared](#) that 'strategic communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives'. According to the 2010 Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communications (2010), NATO StratCom [aims](#) to ensure that audiences receive 'truthful, accurate and timely communication that will allow them to understand and assess the Alliance's actions and intentions'.

While experience from Afghanistan slowly increased the focus on StratCom, Russia's [hybrid warfare](#) (using a mix of conventional and unconventional means, including [information warfare](#)) against Ukraine and its illegal annexation of Crimea forced NATO to swiftly respond to a new reality. The Wales NATO Summit Declaration in September 2014 [stated](#) that Allies 'will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats', including 'enhancing strategic communications'.

In the [face](#) of today's information environment — a 24/7 news cycle, the rise of social networking sites and the interconnectedness of audiences — the aims of NATO's StratCom are set to:

- contribute to implementing NATO operations, missions, and activities by incorporating StratCom planning into all operational and policy planning;
- build public awareness, understanding and support for specific NATO policies, operations and other activities in all relevant audiences; and
- contribute to general public awareness and understanding of NATO as part of a broader and on-going public diplomacy effort.

Roles and responsibilities

According to NATO's 2009 [Concept for Strategic Communications](#), the Assistant Secretary General for the Public Diplomacy Division (ASG PDD) is responsible for the overall coordination of NATO's civilian and military StratCom within the overall direction set by the North Atlantic Council and the Secretary General. Within NATO Headquarters, ASG PDD directs all NATO PDD activities (except press and media, which remain under the Spokesperson's direction). On behalf of the NAC, ASG PDD oversees coordination of Military Committee/International Military Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe and Supreme Allied Commander Transformation strategic communications.

The strategic communications centre of excellence in Riga, Latvia

In order to strengthen NATO's focus on StratCom, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Germany, Poland, the UK and Italy in July 2014 [signed](#) memoranda of understanding on establishing a strategic communications centre of excellence (COE)¹ in Riga, Latvia. At the 2014 Wales Summit, the Allies welcomed the StratCom COE as a 'meaningful contribution to NATO's efforts' in the field.

The mission of the [NATO-accredited StratCom COE](#) (which, like NATO's 22 [other COEs](#), is not directly funded by NATO and is not part of the NATO command structure) is to 'contribute to the Alliance's communication processes by providing comprehensive analyses, timely advice and practical support to the Alliance'. It also operates as a 'hub for debate' within StratCom disciplines comprising public diplomacy, public affairs, military public affairs, information operations and psychological operations. In 2016, the StratCom COE will, among other things:

- support the development of a NATO Military Committee strategic communications policy and doctrine;
- study Russia's information campaign against Ukraine as well as ISIL's/Da'esh's information campaign and its influence on NATO countries;
- study how social media are being used as a weapon in hybrid warfare and research how to identify the early signals of a hybrid warfare scenario;
- research 10 years of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan) strategic communications to extract lessons learned;
- study the implementation of StratCom within Allied nations and analyse the implementation of the NATO StratCom policy throughout the NATO command structure.

Adapting to evolving adversaries

NATO is facing a large and proliferating number of global Internet warriors. **Russia** sponsors its own [Веб-бригады](#) — 'web brigades', or [state-sponsored](#) online commentators and trolls — as well as some [20 500](#) Twitter accounts (as of April 2015), all of which are actively contributing to controlling domestic and international Internet dialogue. The Kremlin adds an offensive element by creating propaganda campaigns that incite panic, spark tension and undermine trust. Amid Russia's on-going '[war of words](#)' against Ukraine — an area in which NATO and the EU in 2015 [agreed](#) to intensify cooperation — NATO has supported the [Ukraine Crisis Media Centre](#) and Ukrainian media, trained government officials and civil society activists in communications, and Allies have sent national communications experts to the Kyiv NATO Liaison Office. Ukrainian media [report](#) that a new centre for research of experience of hybrid war with Russia could be discussed at the July 2016 NATO Summit.

By the autumn of 2014, supporters of **ISIL/Da'esh** (which took a more aggressive approach after videos of US journalist James Foley's [beheading](#) spread on social media in August 2014) were using some [46 000](#) Twitter accounts; today, the group sends out an [estimated](#) 90 000 tweets a day. In June 2015, the US State Department acknowledged, — given an estimated 30 000 foreign ISIL/Da'esh combatants, most of them coming from NATO countries — that existing efforts had had limited success in the face of Da'esh's effective social media networks, and that the NATO-led coalition was [losing](#) the social media war.

Lessons learned

Whereas Russia's campaigns against Ukraine are still being analysed, the verdict on the ISIL/Daesh battle looks clear: NATO has been moderately effective in combating Da'esh on the social media. In the light of operations in Afghanistan, Libya and Kosovo, and in the face of the current aggressive propaganda campaigns from the east and the south, experts have [argued](#) that NATO's 2009 definition looks 'stale and dated'. This and the absence of a StratCom doctrine hamper the StratCom cause, and 'key elements' of the StratCom architecture (in particular, target audience analysis) are currently missing. At the same time, some argue that the fact that StratCom has been positioned within NATO's public affairs structure shows that the Alliance has failed to grasp the importance of this instrument and explains why military commanders in most NATO nations remain 'unaware of its power to affect the operational environment'. While the Latvia StratCom COE is already addressing several of the alleged shortcomings, the broader impact of this COE remains to be seen.

NATO and EU StratCom cooperation — an evolving partnership

The June 2016 [Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy](#) states that the EU will enhance its strategic communications efforts and 'step up its contribution to Europe's collective security, working closely with its partners, beginning with NATO'. The April 2016 [Joint Framework to counter hybrid threats](#) — building on the 2015 [European Agenda on Security](#) — calls for coordinated StratCom mechanisms to counter disinformation and expose hybrid threats. It proposes a centre of excellence (COE) for countering hybrid threats, to collaborate with existing EU and NATO COEs.

The European External Action Service's (EEAS) [East StratCom Task Force](#) — operational since September 2015 but with no budget of its own — debunks disinformation and promotes the EU's positive narratives in the Eastern Neighbourhood (EaP). It [maintains](#) contact with the NATO Headquarters StratCom team and the StratCom COE in Riga, to exchange information on StratCom trends in the EaP. Contact with NATO will continue in the context of the new joint framework on countering hybrid threats (see above).

On 12 July, the European Parliament's Committee for Foreign Affairs will vote on a report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties ([2016/2030\(INI\)](#)). The [draft report](#) calls for the EU StratCom Task Force to be turned into a fully-fledged unit within the EEAS, with proper staffing and adequate budgetary resources.

Endnote

¹ NATO's website [explains](#) that COEs are international military organisations that train and educate leaders and specialists from NATO members and partner countries. They assist in doctrine development, identify lessons learned, improve interoperability and capabilities, and test and validate concepts through experimentation.

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