



(Photo by Michael Abrams, Stars and Stripes)

Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, U.S. Army Europe commander, is interviewed by the Romanian media at the Smarden Training Area in Romania, on Tuesday, 24 March 2015, after watching the 173rd Airborne Brigade parachute into the training area.

Commanders and Communication

Lt. Col. David Hylton, U.S. Army

That's the essence of good communication: having the right intent up front and letting our actions speak for themselves.

—Adm. Michael Mullen

It is impossible to not communicate in one form or another. Every word, image, and action taken—or not taken—sends messages to various audiences,

and globalization of the media has created a security environment where messages can have a swift and potentially decisive impact. In current conflicts, the

perceptions of the interested populations have become, in some cases, as important—or more important—than the activities and operations conducted on the ground. Consequently, leaders at all levels have come to recognize the need to consider and incorporate public communication in their activities.

The importance of public communication with regard to its potential impact on military operations is difficult to overstate. Now retired Adm. James Stavridis described the primacy of communication as a tool he had for dealing with issues in Latin America while serving as commander of United States Southern Command, saying, “Strategic communication is our main battery. We’re in the business of launching ideas, not Tomahawk missiles.”¹

Communication may be the only tool the commander has available to respond to a developing situation impacting U.S. interests. Effective communication often sets the conditions for future operations and, in some cases, may even be used to prevent future conflict.

Toward Defining Public Communication

Communication is often misunderstood for many reasons. It is not defined in doctrine, even though the term has been recurrently used in recent history. Complicating the lack of an official definition has been the conflicting uses and definitions of communication put forward and implemented among various commands and agencies. Additionally, many of the diverse proponents involved in the use of communication—such as public affairs, military information support operations (formerly psychological operations), and information operations—have put forth their own definitions based on their own perspectives, interests, and agendas. This confusion, along with other conflicting definitions formulated by the Department of Defense and other U.S. government agencies such as the State Department, has negatively impacted communication efforts.

Clarifying the Meaning

In its simplest form, communication is the exchange of ideas between two parties. The sender sends a message to a receiver, who interprets the message through cultural, political, and societal filters. The receiver then provides feedback to the sender, who interprets the feedback through another set of filters. The concepts of

communication are found throughout strategic communication, communication strategy, and, most recently, communication synchronization. All of these terms are interrelated but may apply to the different levels of communication to be considered by the commander.

For this article, communication is used as an overarching term to refer to all of the various forms of external communication a leader may conduct.

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication (STRATCOM) was the first term adopted by the government (popularized following 9/11) that attempted to provide a working definition for synchronized strategic-level activities aimed at communicating a unified message supporting strategic objectives. STRATCOM was initially viewed as the guiding force behind alignment of the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of national power to achieve national goals and objectives—a complex and daunting undertaking. Conceptually, STRATCOM was conceived as being formulated at the highest levels of government power and then permeating all levels of government activities to create a unity of messaging that harmonized and supported all other strategic activities.

Subsequently, STRATCOM became primarily focused on public communication activities. It is now recognized that while communication activities at all levels have different challenges, the activities are based on a central set of concepts and principles generally conceived as steps taken to align the actions, words, and images of an organization. Uniform acceptance of this general concept appears in various definitions of STRATCOM. For example, Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines strategic communication as—

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 through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.²

The 2010 *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy* uses the

same definition but adds, “Further and more specifically, effective SC [STRATCOM] requires synchronization of crucial themes, messages, images, and actions with other nonlethal and lethal operations.”³

Elsewhere, scholar Christopher Paul suggests a working definition of strategic communication: “coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives.”⁴

Additionally, a 2009 Department of Defense report on STRATCOM offers a somewhat more elaborate explanation:

Strategic communication is 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. Strategic communication essentially means sharing meaning (i.e., communicating) in support of national objectives (i.e., strategically). This involves listening as much as transmitting and applies not only to information, but also [to] physical communication—action that conveys meaning.⁵

Regardless of the great effort expended among many agencies to clarify and refine the concept for use at the policy level, many object to applying the term STRATCOM to the military, for two primary reasons. First, the military commander does not have control over all the instruments of national power. Although it is recognized that the commander is a contributor to the informational instrument and the majority stakeholder in the military instrument, it is also apparent that commanders must rely on, and coordinate with, the rest of the government for employment of the other instruments of national power to achieve a STRATCOM effect. Such coordination is routinely dogged by internal policy disagreements and bureaucratic foot dragging that often inhibit formulation and execution of national STRATCOM. Nevertheless, at lower levels, commanders should remember that they do have tools that mirror, to some degree, other instruments of national power. For example, in a given situation, the commander’s key leader engagements clearly have the potential for complementing regional diplomacy, while targeted

spending by a commander’s forces can complement the government’s overall employment of the economic instrument for a strategic purpose.

The second disagreement with the term is based on the word *strategic* itself. Though a tactical commander will usually have little direct opportunity to engage with the other instruments of national power at the strategic level, globalization of communication has resulted in a situation where tactical actions may have a strategic effect. Therefore, commanders at all levels may make decisions that have effects and repercussions that reach far beyond their formally assigned areas of operation. Commenting on this modern development, Adm. Michael Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff observes,

It is time for us to take a harder look at “strategic communication.” Frankly, I don’t care for the term. We get too hung up on that word, *strategic*. If we’ve learned nothing else these past eight years, it should be that the lines between strategic, operational, and tactical are blurred beyond distinction.⁶

Communication Strategy

Communication strategy, COMMSTRAT, also known as commander’s communication strategy, is an attempt to refine and adapt the concept of STRATCOM for communication efforts at the level of combatant command or military service and at operational or regional level. Combatant commanders use COMMSTRAT to align the activities they control to achieve their objectives and goals within their areas of responsibility. As with STRATCOM, a commander employing COMMSTRAT does not have control of the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments within the operational area, so the command must coordinate with agencies responsible for the other instruments of national power to synchronize planned actions with words in order to achieve the commander’s objectives.

Thus, by its nature, COMMSTRAT is inherently difficult to coordinate. The different goals, objectives, priorities, opinions, and agendas among all of the parties involved are often contrary to those of the commander. Additionally, COMMSTRAT relies on the guidance from high-level, whole-of-government STRATCOM policy makers at the Department of



(Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Adolf Pinlac, Washington National Guard)

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Tim Reeves and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Kevin Crisp, 1st Battalion, 168th Aviation Regiment, Washington National Guard, perform a "flag drag" high above Puget Sound 4 July 2014 on their way to Gas Work Park in Seattle as part of the Seattle Seafair 4th of July celebration.

Defense or Joint Staff to guide and align its efforts with other government players.

Communication Synchronization

The latest guidance for such communication activities appears in the relatively new communication synchronization process discussed in Joint Doctrine Note 2-13, *Commander's Communication Synchronization*, published in 2013. The publication defines communication synchronization as—

a joint force commander's process for coordinating and synchronizing themes, messages, images, operations, and actions to support strategic communication-related objectives and ensure the integrity and consistency of themes and messages to the lowest tactical level through the integration and synchronization of all relevant communication activities.⁷

Commanders use communication synchronization (a process) to coordinate the actions of their commands to achieve mission success. Communication

synchronization is more narrowly focused than COMMSTRAT but does not operate in a vacuum. It is nested within COMMSTRAT just as COMMSTRAT is nested within STRATCOM.

Recurring Communication Themes

Though not all military definitions of communication agree on all aspects of communication, they universally agree on the need to plan and coordinate communication efforts. As a result, there are recurring themes common to the definitions. These themes are essential to communication activities, and many are based on the commander and his or her leadership.

Communication through action. The first common theme is that actions communicate. This reflects the old adage that "actions speak louder than words." The 2008 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) theater strategic communication strategy says,

Ensure actions match words. We must ensure we do what we say we do. Our actions will invariably have a greater impact than what

we communicate verbally or in writing. Consistency between “video” and “audio” will reinforce our STRATCOM messages and maintain ISAF credibility.⁸

Actions are often the most visible aspect of an organization’s policies and goals. All actions—such as leader engagements, military-to-military engagements, movements on the ground, visits by leaders, overflights of aircraft, and transits of ships—send messages. In the Internet age, reports of actions taken and the results of those actions are quickly spread across the globe; they affect the perceptions of the audiences the commander is trying to engage. It is important to envision how the actions will be perceived by the different audiences and what message they will deliver. It is also important to recognize that there is risk that actions taken may not deliver the desired messages or may conflict with words and images used. Moreover, inaction is a form of communication since not acting can also send a message, which may also pose considerable risk.

From a strategic perspective, planning a communication strategy should emphasize not permitting a *say-do gap* to emerge. A say-do gap arises in the minds of the targeted audiences when an organization’s statements conflict with the actions it takes. Saying one thing while doing another sends conflicting messages and destroys credibility. Recent examples of a say-do gap came from operations in Afghanistan, where NATO forces proclaimed respect for the Afghan people and Islam, a verbal message that appeared contradicted by images and incidents of civilian casualties and military operations in and around mosques. Such apparent inconsistencies were successfully exploited by the Taliban via globally distributed images on the Internet.

Leaders at all levels can reduce the say-do gap by establishing an organization or process to examine planned actions and determine if they potentially conflict with the command’s words. This allows the commander to make a more effective risk analysis when making a deliberate decision to conduct or modify an operation. It also allows the organization the opportunity to anticipate



(AP photo by Rahmat Gul)

Afghans shout anti-United States slogans during a demonstration 23 February 2012 in Mehterlam, Laghman Province, east of Kabul, Afghanistan. Afghan police fired shots in the air to disperse hundreds of protesters who tried to break into an American military base in the country’s east to vent their anger over a Quran-burning incident.

possible adverse consequences of actions and to be proactive in postoperation damage control. As noted by Adm. Mullen,

We hurt ourselves more when our words don't align with our actions. Our enemies regularly monitor the news to discern coalition and American intent as weighed against the efforts of our forces. When they find a "say-do" gap—such as Abu Ghraib—they drive a truck right through it. So should we, quite frankly.⁹

Establishing a communication mindset. Commanders set the conditions for preventing the pitfalls of a say-do gap by establishing a *communication*

mindset within the unit. Commanders do this by including communication objectives as part of their vision and the overall objectives. If communication is part of the commander's objectives, the staff and subordinate leaders are forced to consider and include communication in their formulation of objectives and operational planning. With a communication mindset, the staff and subordinate commanders become habituated to automatically considering the effects of their actions in terms of public perceptions and potential reactions. Consequently, they include communication at the beginning and in all subsequent stages of planning.

Establishing a process and organization responsible for communication is also part of establishing the necessary communication mindset. The process and organization are used to identify new communication opportunities and to work within the staff to make recommendations to the commander. They also work to deconflict messaging and to prioritize engagements with outside organizations. This helps prevent counterproductive audience saturation and the useless expenditure of effort on unpromising, cost-ineffective communication endeavors. The process and organization also help to establish priorities for communication within the commander's guidance and objectives. This prioritization seeks to achieve the maximum possible benefit from



(Photo by Spc. Joshua Kruger, 55th Signal Company (Combat Camera))
An Afghan child waves a flag at a coalition forces' member as he travels to an Afghan National Security Forces-led medical clinic 12 March 2013 in Panjwai District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. The clinic was held to enable conditions for improved security, governance, and development.

communication efforts, given the resources available, while identifying potential seams and gaps in the efforts. The coordination process may be formal through regularly scheduled meetings or informal using an ad hoc process to coordinate communication as the need arises; a combination of the two is often most effective.

A communication mindset includes consideration of the communication effects of tactical maneuver, logistic, and contracting operations. By creating a communication mindset, the staff learns to consider the communication effects of all planned actions. Every action performed, dollar spent, or contract approved sends a message to someone, somewhere. The communication mindset takes such into consideration as well as the cultural, political, and societal filters that the interested populations will use to view the actions.

A key benefit of inculcating such a communication mindset is that it promotes recognition and consideration of the potential second- and third-order effects of the actions taken by the organization, including the unintended consequences that may arise from those actions. All of the staff members should therefore adopt a communication mindset through which they provide input into planning campaigns and operations. One effect of adding communication to the commander's objectives is that it expands communication considerations beyond the perspective of



(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Pictorial Center)

Edward R. Murrow, then U.S. Information Agency director, appears in the 1961 Cold War counterpropaganda film *The Challenge of Ideas* to discuss the ideological battle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Edward R. Murrow was a noted American journalist who came to prominence as a radio broadcaster during World War II. After the war, he garnered international attention by producing a series of investigative reports that led to the censure of U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy, who had reputedly been using smear tactics to root out and stigmatize persons in the government and media he regarded as communist agents. Murrow was appointed in 1961 by Pres. John F. Kennedy to head the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). Murrow accepted the appointment on the condition that he be included in all cabinet and National Security Council meetings so that policy would be synchronized with official press releases from the government, especially during times of crisis. He served in that capacity until 1964.¹⁰

traditional communicators, such as public affairs, military information support operations, and information operations, and it widens the aperture to solicit perspectives from staff sections such as civil affairs, the political advisor, and the chaplain. As a result, operational planners receive the benefit of insight from many different and useful perspectives regarding communication effects of planned operations.

A resulting second benefit of such a communication mindset is enhanced speed and agility in responding to negative messages and opponent communication actions.

Additionally, since commanders are already responsible for examining the higher headquarters' objectives and supporting the portion appropriate to their organization, a well-established formal synchronizing process will help commanders execute the command responsibility of nesting organizational communication objectives with higher headquarters' communication objectives. For example, as higher headquarters' objectives may address issues at a national level, subordinate objectives must necessarily be tailored to address issues mainly associated with subordinate areas of operations.

Necessity for establishing clear communication guidance. Commanders must support communication efforts and provide clear and substantive guidance for them to be effective. Without commander support and emphasis, communication efforts will die on the vine, and the staff will return from a communications mindset to a traditional operational focus without sophisticated anticipation of the communication aspects of planned operations.

To cultivate the communication mindset, leaders must produce clear communication guidance that aligns communication efforts across the staff and with that of subordinates. The best guidance is not strict guidance in which everyone is expected to parrot the exact same words and phrases. Rather, it is guidance that establishes the commander's communication vision and intent within a communication framework that allows the staff and subordinates to adapt the intent of guidance to a specific task, while supporting the commander's communication objectives.

Though some issues and audiences may be reserved for commanders to discuss or engage, the most effective approach may be for commanders to delegate authority to the staff and subordinates to creatively adapt communication guidance to use in their respective lanes. With such a communication mindset, the commander empowers everyone to be a spokesperson for the command.

Having the people on the ground telling and demonstrating the command's story lends credibility and depth to the communication effort. This delegation manifests itself in the concept of the strategic corporal:

A strategic corporal is a soldier that possesses technical mastery in the skill of arms while being aware that his judgment, decision making, and action can all have strategic and political consequences that can affect the outcome of a given mission and the reputation of his country.¹¹

Possibly as important, the strategic corporal avoids tactical-level actions that could have strategic-level effects by acting professionally, understanding the importance of his or her actions, and understanding the commander's communication guidance.

Providing communication guidance at the outset of staff planning ensures staffs consider communication early. Without early guidance, communication will not be woven into planning from the outset but will likely be added on as an afterthought. As a result, particularly in the event of a crisis, the messages among the various staff elements involved in complex operations will be discordant, confused, and in some cases contradictory. Poorly conceived ad hoc communications have great potential for making things worse, as happened after the failed invasion of the Bay of Pigs, Cuba, in 1961. A statement often attributed to Edward R. Murrow, when asked to deal with the ensuing public relations debacle, illustrates the need for synchronized communication guidance from the outset of planning: "If they want me in on the crash landings, I better damn well be in on the takeoffs."¹² Murrow, then director of the United States Information Agency, had not been told of the invasion—sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency—until after it failed.

Similarly, the commander's guidance will also help prevent the appearance of the "strategic knucklehead." The strategic knucklehead arises from "an absence of judgment, leadership, decisiveness, and moral courage [that] can produce outcomes or reactions that have a negative strategic effect."¹³ Such an individual causes a strategic problem through negative actions at the tactical



(Photo by Maj. Edward Hooks, U.S. Army Pacific Contingency Command Post PAO)

Soldiers assigned to the U.S. Army Pacific Contingency Command Post conduct a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief coordination meeting during a readiness exercise 25 September 2012 on the Taliai Military Camp, Tonga. The exercise is part of Coral Reef—a multinational emergency deployment and readiness exercise with partners in Australia, New Zealand, and Tonga. Such staff planners should incorporate a communications mindset that anticipates second- and third-order effects among populations as a result of operations.

level. Often, the problems are far larger than the tactical operations that cause them. Religious or cultural carelessness, or any neglect of professionalism demonstrated through actions such as desecrating Qurans, needlessly damaging mosques, or mistreating prisoners, have had long-lasting effects that remained well after the tactical operation was complete.

Leaders also must recognize their special roles in communication. There are times when the commander is best suited to be the organization spokesperson because of the commander's position and responsibility. The same goes for key leader engagements. The commander is the best person to conduct certain engagements with certain other leaders, such as senior military leaders or senior political leaders. The commander speaks with an authority that other people do not possess.

Feedback for communication. Like all other operational endeavors, communication can always be improved upon. Therefore, feedback on communication efforts is an essential part of the effort. However, it is often difficult to determine a cause-and-effect relationship between words, images, and actions and the perceptions of a population. Feedback may come from the intelligence system, public affairs reports, or general-perception "atmospheric" reports from the soldiers in the field. To make an assessment regarding the impact of communication efforts,

the commander will have to direct resources to gathering feedback. Commanders then must assess this information and make their decisions based on previous experience, the recommendations of their staffs, and their own instincts. Notwithstanding, it should be understood that influence achieved through communication is an investment that usually requires a thorough, time-consuming, coordinated effort to achieve the commander's objectives.

Conclusion

To reap the benefits of a staff imbued with a communication mindset, commanders must support communication efforts so those efforts can be effective. Communication is commanders' business. If a commander does not recognize its importance, buy in to it, and support it, an essential tool will go unused, which in some cases could mean mission failure. It is the

responsibility of the commander to establish a communication mindset that permeates the command. The mindset must assimilate the operators as well as the organizations that are normally recognized as communicators. Staff sections that recognize and consider the importance of the communication aspects of their actions will help eliminate the say-do gap potentially generated during planning for operations. Additionally, a commander who empowers subordinates to communicate, while also recognizing when and where his or her special role in communication should be used, will be more effective than a commander who disregards his or her communication responsibilities. In sum, a commander who effectively uses communication will be able to more effectively set the conditions for future operations and may even be able to prevent needless conflict in the future. ■

Lt. Col. David Hylton, U.S. Army, is a public affairs officer assigned to U.S. Army Contracting Command at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama. He holds a BS from West Virginia University and an MA from Regent University. His previous assignments include communication strategy and public affairs observer-trainer for the Joint Staff J-7 (Joint Force Development), Deployable Training Division; chief of public affairs for NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan; and chief of public affairs, First Army.

Notes

Epigraph. Michael G. Mullen, "From the Chairman: Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics," *Joint Force Quarterly* 55 (4th Quarter 2009): 3, accessed 18 June 2015, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/jfq/mullen_strat_comm_basics.pdf.

1. U.S. Joint Forces Command, *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy*, Version 3.0 (Suffolk, VA: Joint Warfighting Center, 24 June 2010), III-1, accessed 18 June 2015, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/doctrine/jwfc/sc_hbk10.pdf.

2. Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 March 2015), 232, accessed 16 June 2015, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf.

3. U.S. Joint Forces Command, *Commander's Handbook*.

4. Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, April 2011), 3.

5. Department of Defense, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept*, Ver. 1.0, 7 October 2009: ii, accessed 18 June 2015, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/concepts/joint_concepts/jic_strategiccommunications.pdf.

6. Mullen, "From the Chairman," 2.

7. Joint Doctrine Note 2-13, *Commander's Communication Synchronization*, 16 December 2013, accessed 18 June 2015, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/notes/jdn2_13.pdf.

8. International Security Assistance Force, *ISAF Theater Strategic Communication Plan*, 2008, 4.

9. Mullen, "From the Chairman," 4.

10. "Edward R. Murrow, Broadcaster and Ex-Chief of U.S.I.A., Dies," *New York Times* obituary, 28 April 1965, accessed 23 July 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0425.html>; see also "Murrow at the United States Information Agency (USIA), 1961-1964," Tufts University website, accessed 23 July 2015, <http://dca.lib.tufts.edu/features/murrow/exhibit/usia.html>.

11. Lynda Libby, "The Strategic Corporal: Some Requirements in Training and Education," *Australian Army Journal* 55(2) (2005): 140.

12. Edward R. Murrow, quoted in Crocker Snow Jr., "Murrow in the Public Interest: From Press Affairs to Public Diplomacy," IIP Digital website, 1 June 2008, accessed 18 June 2015, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2008/06/20080601113033eai-fas0.5135767.html#ixzz3FZ1gUD1c>.

13. Butch Bracknell, "The Strategic Knucklehead," *Small Wars Journal* (13 September 2011): 2, accessed 18 June 2015, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-strategic-knucklehead>.