Winning the story war: Strategic communication and the conflict in Afghanistan

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A B S T R A C T

In conflicts of the information age success in the application of force depends less on the outcome of tactical operations on the battlefields but more on how the war’s purpose, course and conduct is viewed by public opinion at home as well as within the theatre of operations. Therefore western allies in Iraq and Afghanistan are not only involved in a physical struggle but also in a struggle over perceptions, for no long-term engagement of troops is possible without support from home, nor can a counterinsurgency succeed without the support of the local population. While the ability to exert influence upon various relevant target groups – opponents, the local population and the home front – has always been crucially important during conflicts, with the more recent globalized media this has led to previously unknown potential opportunities to influence audiences. With the intermixing of target audiences and the successes achieved by terrorists in the field of communication, the importance of the ideological struggle has increased enormously. In this context the concept of strategic communication has become relevant, which refers to the consistency of strategy, activities, themes and messages, and the aim of obtaining legitimacy and support. The heart of a strategic communication strategy is formed by a strategic narrative, a compelling storyline which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn. Through a case study about the effectiveness of the execution of strategic communication during the mission in Afghanistan, the author wishes to increase the understanding of the concept.

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1. Introduction

The attack of 9/11 on the United States in 2001 ushered in the age of worldwide terrorism. Since then, terrorist organizations and insurgencies have chalked up many successes in the field of communications, not only in Muslim countries but also in the West. Some are convinced the West is involved in a ‘war of ideas’, a communication struggle with political credibility and legitimacy at stake (McChrystal, 2009, p. 6). This struggle turns on influence; terrorists and insurgents try to influence their opponents, their followers and international public opinion to reach their aims, not only by their deeds, but also with words and images. And mutatis mutandis the same goes for their adversaries: ‘In both terrorism and insurgencies, states and non-state actors compete against each other to gain influence among key public audiences—the center of gravity in virtually all contemporary conflicts,’ according to James Forest (2009, p. xi). Since every state and military must maintain the support of their people, it is possible that even the nation with the strongest military capacity can face strategic defeat, if public opinion erodes and political willpower diminishes (Ringsmose & Børgensen, forthcoming; Smith, 2005, p. 293). Besides the domestic population, in wars where forces fight among the people, influencing the local population is also of the utmost importance, as the will and support of the people is the power base of insurgents and terrorists. In short as Freedman (2006,
p. 93) concludes, success in the application of force depends less on the outcome of tactical operations on the battlefields but more on how the war’s purpose, course and conduct is viewed by public opinion at home as well as within the theatre of operations. In any case, since 2001 the western powers have invested heavily in improving their activities in various spheres of influence activities. And yet all too often these activities take place independently of each other, without proper coordination. In addition, the practices of combating terrorism and counterinsurgency have been often completely at odds with the communication strategy. For example, civilians killed during the bombing in Afghanistan, alleged desecrations of the Koran in Guantanamo Bay, the abuse of prisoners in Iraq—such abuses hardly jibed with the message of freedom, hope and democracy. These events did not only lead to criticism from the local population of Iraq and Afghanistan, but led also to a decline of domestic support within the western alliance, which was aggravated by the lack of mission success and the rise of casualties.

It was in this context the concept of strategic communication (Stratcom) and narratives gained currency. While the terms are relatively new the concepts behind them have been subject to studies since long ago. For decades scholars in the field of political communication and international relations have studied the conditions under which the population supports their leaders to apply military force (Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009, pp. 1–15). It is assumed that during protracted conflict, politicians face numerous and various challenges associated with political communication (Roselle, 2010, p. 1).

Therefore, the communication of strategic narratives is important because they tell the story why a state is in conflict, why it is of such importance and how success will look like (Freedman, 2006; Roselle, 2010). Similarly, scholars have conducted research on the importance of capturing local people’s perceptions during irregular conflicts, predominantly from a military perspective (Helmus, Paul, & Glenn, 2007). From the colonial wars to the counterinsurgency campaigns in Indo-China and Africa in the second part of the 20th century, western scholars and military practitioners studied the relevance of local public sentiment—and the ways to influence it. Since the dragging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan the research in these fields grew exponentially.

So while the principle behind Stratcom is not new, after the attacks of September 11 it took on an enormously enhanced significance. Since then, the concepts have been extensively described. In this paper I wish to contribute to the comprehension of strategic communication by a close examination of the western communication efforts during the mission in Afghanistan.

The question that I want to explore in this paper is what extent strategic communication has been practiced effectively during the mission in Afghanistan. In the first section of the article I examine the concept more closely in this new context. What does it now mean exactly, when is it effective and why is it so important? In the second part I shall then explicate how the concept of Stratcom has developed in the United States, NATO and Afghanistan itself, in relation to the different stages of the mission in Afghanistan. Bearing the principles of Stratcom in mind, I discuss to which extent narratives and activities in Afghanistan have measured up to those principles. In the first stage of 2001–2003, when the operation was still envisaged as a counter-terrorism operation, communication and influence activities were naturally aimed mainly at the opponent. However, this gradually changed in the period 2003–2006 as the conflict in Afghanistan transformed itself into a counterinsurgency. In the course of this transformation it was gradually realized that the key to success lay in the support of the local population. Finally, during the period 2006–2010, characterized by the continuation of the complex counterinsurgency, increased attention was given to a regional approach and an increased number of (European) countries contributed to the mission. This led to growing interest in Stratcom. In the final section of the article I not only conclude that considerable progress has been achieved in several areas, but also argue that—undoubtedly because of the many-sided and complex nature of the phenomenon—one still cannot speak of an all-embracing strategy nor claim that Stratcom has yet been integrally implemented at all levels. Further, it is argued that while Strategic communication is important for effective functioning at the highest levels of ISAF, the concept as well as the master narrative also needs to be introduced throughout the entire organization. This raises a number of critical comments: to what extent is effective Stratcom a real and feasible possibility?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Strategic communication and narratives

While the term strategic communication found its way only recently into the political and military discourse, history shows that the principles behind the term are not new. There is a long history of scholars addressing the importance of communication and fostering public sentiment in foreign policy and international relations. For a long time scholars believed that the domain of foreign policy needed to be free from the moods impacts of the population as they would only disrupt a perfectly rational decision-making process (Gelpi, Feaver, & Reifler, 2009). The war in Vietnam changed that viewpoint drastically as it obviously demonstrated the causal link between public opinion and foreign policy (Gelpi et al., 2009).

Nowadays it is assumed that the public’s perception of a war is greatly shaped by the narratives that governments construct and communicate in order to convey a sense of cause, purpose and mission (Freedman, 2006; Ringsmose & Børgensen, forthcoming; Roselle, 2010). Freedman (2006) concludes that in conflicts abroad not only retaining the support of a home population is a vital strategic attribute, but also the ability to turn a potentially hostile local public opinion in one’s favor. For a long time scholars have conducted research on the importance of capturing local people’s perceptions during irregular conflicts. Rupert Smith (2005, p. 238) emphasizes that the US in Vietnam were never able to win over the local population as they offered no alternative to the North Vietnamese narrative of the liberation of the country. On the other side, the
British managed to win the support of the local population in their struggle against the insurgency in Malaya which left the communists without their power base. The famous concept of “winning hearts and minds” originates from that period.

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in the reemergence of interest in these concepts. Scholars note that credibility and legitimacy are essential to win the trust of the local population, while at the same time, the opinion of the home front is crucial. Among others Peter van Ham (2010) argues that without public support long-term commitment and expensive military deployment are impossible. According to Joseph Nye (2011, p. 19) the outcome of conflicts are shaped not merely by whose army wins but also by whose story wins. These insights are also gaining currency in military thinking, for instance in the COIN-doctrine of NATO (2009a): “Paradoxically, the reality is that ‘what is believed is more important than what is true’. The military realizes that the actual outcome of tactical operations is less important than what the local population thinks of it.

Today, scholars and states use the concepts of strategic communication and narratives in research about public support at home, the support of the local population in the conflict areas as well as other relevant target audiences such as alliances and international publics, sometimes even simultaneously. This makes sense when considering the current media landscape and the ongoing globalization which merges different target audiences together to one global listening audience. However, although many nowadays talk about Strategic communication, there is far less conceptual clarity evident. Indeed, conceptually, Stratcom may even succumb to the tyranny of terminology, i.e. the many different conceptions and the maze of definitions to which it is prone. The term began to circulate in the US around mid–2001, and by the middle of 2006 it had entered the politico–military vocabulary in Europe. The US and NATO might deliberately have chosen for the rather vague term Strategic communication because of its neutral connotation; such terms as ‘influencing’ and ‘psychological operations’ – ‘psyops’ – are too much associated with manipulation, disinformation and exploitation. But this gives rise to very different conceptions of Stratcom. This lack of clarity is only exacerbated when scholars beside “Stratcom” use other terms which are closely related or in essence means the same, such as ‘soft power’, ‘strategic influence’, ‘information warfare’, ‘perception management’, ‘global engagement’, ‘outreach’, ‘political warfare’ and ‘shaping activities’. While there is no single definition for strategic communication, a few aspects recur in all the definitions. Stratcom is mainly to do with the harmonizing of themes, ideas, images and actions. It is generally assumed that Stratcom is not any longer simply a question of a ‘message’, a ‘sender’ and a ‘receiver’. Stratcom involves dialogue and approach, the building of relations, becoming attuned to cultural and historical sensitivities, the local ways of doing things and identifying the indigenous influencers. In the military realm it also often refers to the harmonizing of all activities in the field of public diplomacy, public affairs and (military) information operations (Pelosi, 2010). According to the definitions, Stratcom is thus both a process – orchestrating word and deed with the aim of influencing and providing information – and an indication of an active phenomenon.

Other scholars consider Stratcom more or less as a mindset, an awareness that everything a state (or non-state actor) says or does or leaves undone, whether deliberately or unconsciously, has an influence not only on the perceptions of the local population but also on worldwide public opinion—including that on their own home front (Corman, Trethewy, & Goodall, 2008). Effective Stratcom is not aimed exclusively at a specific target group, but takes into account the possible consequences on the perception of all other possible relevant target groups. Stratcom is aimed at undermining and delegitimizing the opponent, gaining support and legitimacy from the local population, from the electorate at home, the international public and all other (relevant) target groups. The essence of Stratcom is that the messages communicated (deliberately or unconsciously) to all these different groups do not conflict with each other. The heart of a Stratcom strategy is a single, carefully constructed strategic narrative based on existing ideas and values. According to Freedman (2006) strategic narratives are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current. They offer a way to frame issues and suggest responses. To be effective they need to resonate with values, interests and prejudices of the intended audiences. Strategic narratives articulate end states and suggest how to get there. Hence, they provide the public with understanding and meaning to events related to the application of military force (Ringsmose & Børgesen, forthcoming; Roselle, 2010).

As stated above, this paper wishes to contribute to the comprehension of the concept of strategic communication based on a case study of Afghanistan. The theoretical argument of the paper is that a strategic narrative needs to be communicated throughout the whole apparatus down to the lowest levels as everyone needs to ‘live the story’ for a strategic narrative to be effective. Recent study of the RAND Corporation (Paul, Clarke, & Grill, 2010) shows that consistency of strategy, activities, themes and messages, is one of the success factors in irregular conflicts. I therefore argue that Stratcom is not only a matter of deliberate exercises in communication and crafting a master narrative, but also about the unwittingly and unwittingly sent messages throughout an entire state or alliance—everything communicated, not only by words but also by deeds.

2.2. The importance of strategic communication

Why is Stratcom of such importance precisely now? Scholars argue conflicts are no longer simply played out in the physical domain, they also have a virtual dimension. One of the reasons for this lies in the nature of globalization such that any news report is instantly disseminated worldwide to different audiences. According to David Betz (2008), the boundaries between different target audiences are blurred: combatants and non-combatants, bystanders and observers can no longer be strictly separated—all are involved. Wherever they are sent in the world, troops have to reckon with a global listening audience: from the Times Online the Taliban pick out quotations by the British commandant in Helmand and disseminate these among the Afghan population, PSYOPS leaflets dropped in Iraq are offered on Ebay, terrorists from different parts of the world come together in a virtual domain of Second Life, while Facebook, with its huge membership has grown to become
the third largest nation of the world. In contrast to western powers, terrorists and insurgents embrace the new possibilities, for them the main thrust of their efforts is to influence the most important and most accessible public: our own grassroots supporters. For example insurgents report falsely of a massacre of civilians by coalition troops which was picked up by the western media and broadcast worldwide with dramatic impact on public opinion. Filmed material of western Pygos soldiers burning two dead Afghan fighters to elicit an exchange of fire from the Taliban led to an international wave of indignation. Nowadays, local civilians, journalists and terrorists can film the coalition’s tactical actions using either a camera or mobile phone and within the hour place these – sometimes manipulated in Photoshop – on the internet by means of YouTube, Myspace, Blogspot, Flickr and Twitter.

Whereas in the past states were able to exercise complete control cover the reporting of news, scholars note that both states and media concerns themselves have lost the monopoly on information. Citizens make their own news, terrorists and insurgents have become their own broadcasters. With the interactive new media the audience is no longer passive, everyone is potentially a broadcaster as well as a receiver of news and is able to find friends and supporters, to inform and to mobilize. The ‘commercial’ media play an important role in this. They seize on the most dramatic images of terrorist attacks without being altogether aware of the negative implications of their actions. The media play into their hands of the terrorists and insurgents by providing them with a platform. It is not infrequently that terrorist organizations base their planning on the deadlines of the media or maintain contacts with journalists in order to guarantee maximum attention.

Time and again since 2001 the West lost the struggle with terrorists and insurgents over communication. This was the reason for developing this relatively new approach of Strategic communication. Taking the conflict in Afghanistan as the basic point of reference, I explain below how Strategic communication has developed within the western alliance since the attacks of 11 September 2001.


In the immediate aftermath of those first images of the smoking Twin Towers the United States had the goodwill of almost the entire world. The war in Afghanistan was then seen as completely legitimate. The invasion of troops in the autumn of 2001 had to lead to the capture or elimination of Osama Bin Laden, the destruction of Al Qaida in Afghanistan and the replacement of the Taliban regime by a government that would no longer tolerate the presence of elements of Al Qaida on Afghan territory. During the night of 7 October the offensive began with the bombardment of crucial installations of the Taliban. Despite the clear focus on physical effects, according to President Bush the campaign was intended indirectly as a strategy of influence: “What we do in Afghanistan [will] be a signal to other countries about how serious we are on terror” (Woodward, 2003, p. 98). Nonetheless, President Bush’s rhetoric raised eyebrows among America’s European partners and caused deep unrest in Muslim countries—his comparison, notably, of ‘the war against terror’ with a crusade and a clash between civilizations: “You’re either with us, or with the terrorists” (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2001; President Bush addresses the nation, 2001). His heroic words were intended for American domestic consumption and, indeed, there they were positively received. But because the report of this speech also reached an international public, it turned out to be a gross strategic communications error. It not only corroborated the narrative of Al-Qaida, that a Zionist-Christian alliance was out to destroy Islam, it also gave many moderate Muslims the idea that the Americans were engaged in a fight with Islam in its entirety. Later on, the American government undertook many activities and crafted narratives to clarify that the war on terror was certainly not aimed at all Muslims, but the damage was already done. By December, 2 months after the invasion, the American troops had already achieved considerable success. On 13 November, together with the Northern Alliance, they had taken control of Kabul. In the night of 6 December 2001 Mullah Omar left the Taliban bulwark in Kandahar, effectively ending the Taliban rule over Afghanistan. But all too soon the conflict developed into a complex counterinsurgency, and it was in this context that thinking about Strategic communication also rapidly developed.

3.1.1. The first development of Stratcom at the political level

The attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon made it painfully clear that not everyone in the world regarded the United States in a positive light. In 1999, the State Department’s United States Information Agency had been practically discontinued. Following the 2001 attacks, new life was injected into Public Diplomacy, which at the time was controlled by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. “We need someone who can re-brand U.S. foreign policy, re-brand diplomacy,” said Colin Powell, then US Secretary of State (Futurebrand, 2008). Initiative also came from Public Affairs, including the setting up of Coalition Information Centers, later to be taken over by the White House Office of Global Communication. The American Ministry of Defense also took a first initiative in the development of Strategic communication, still known at that time as Strategic Influence. But the creation of the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) led to considerable controversy, specifically within the Public Affairs community, where many were alarmed by the use of the term ‘influence’. There was concern that the OSI would manipulate the media de media and put into operation campaigns of black propaganda and disinformation. These were activities that were not only forbidden by the Smith–Mundt Act of 1948, they had come to be seen in an entirely negative light under the Nixon government and more specifically following the Iran–Contra scandal. As a result of negative reporting by the media, the OSI was wound up in February 2002, only a few months after its creation. However, Defense had learned its lesson and the term ‘Strategic influence’ was no longer used after April 2002. Activities
intended to influence opinion were henceforth covered by the more neutral ‘Strategic communication’ (Kuehl & Armistead, 2007, p. 13).

3.1.2. Exerting influence in Afghanistan: primarily with the enemy in view

Although there were numerous communication and influence activities from the very beginning of the campaign in Afghanistan there was no question of an all-embracing communication strategy to coordinate the various different activities and reports (United States Department of Defense, 2003). Coalition Forces did not carry out a strategic narrative and the incidental influence activities served mainly to support the offensive operations. Nor did these activities take much account of international opinion; they were mainly directed at Afghanistan itself. The term ‘Stratcom’ and the principles associated with it had not yet come into fashion in this beginning phase of the Afghanistan mission. This is evident, for example, in the meager stream of communication flowing from Afghanistan to the home front during those first years. Unlike earlier campaigns, very few representatives of Public Affairs were present and were initially kept away from the battlefield. As a result, it was for a long time unclear to the American public what exactly was happening in Afghanistan and whether or not the mission was achieving success.

It was also the case that the influence activities in Afghanistan itself were not integrated into a single all-embracing communication process including a strategic narrative, but were independently carried out by American Psychological Operations (Psyops) units. Although 4th Psychological Operations Group was only moderately well prepared to support operations in Afghanistan, beginning 15 October American aircraft dropped millions of leaflets. In addition, the Americans deployed the EC 130J Commando Solo to transmit news reports on Afghan radio. The Psyops campaign primarily supported military operations, while the messages were mainly intended for the civilian population to separate them from the Taliban and discourage them from supporting the Taliban in the conflict. The importance of the local population itself was however only marginally considered, the activities were primarily intended to support the main objective: the elimination of the terrorists. But any effect the Psyops activities may have had was negated by the blunt message communicated by the massive bombing. The bombs did not just cow the Taliban, more importantly they terrorized the local population and played directly into the hands of the Taliban and Al Qaida. The latter were well aware of the importance of the support of the population and tried to convince them that the Americans had attacked their country for religious reasons. The communication strategy and the military operations in Afghanistan were inline with the ideas and outlook of the American government. The Bush administration sent American troops to Afghanistan as part of the ‘Global War on Terror’ whose focus was on “targeting the bad guys and cleaning up after the overthrow of the Taliban regime” (Jones, 2009, p. 112). Already before American troops were sent into Afghanistan it was clear that their deployment was not aimed at nation-building, counterinsurgency or peacekeeping. It was therefore logical that the perception of the population was of subsidiary concern and that consistency in messages or the synchronization of deeds and words were not important factors for the success of the offensive campaign, which was primarily aimed at the physical destruction and dissipation of Al Qaida, the Taliban and their infrastructure.

In 2002, after the successful offensive which ended with the expulsion from Kandahar, the nature of the conflict changed, reflecting the Bonn Agreement in which it was agreed that next to the counter-terrorism operations of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) an International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) would restore calm and security in Afghanistan by means of a ‘light footprint’. During the subsequent years, military Information Operations, the branch which was responsible for the coordination of influence activities, played only a marginal role in Afghanistan and only at the highest levels where staff members were embedded (Cox, 2006, pp. 32–40). Because of the lack of concrete guidelines as to how Information Operations was to be integrated and implemented, and because there was little knowledge about Information Operations, they were carried out without consistency. Down to the lowest levels, independently operating Psyops units were embedded (Cox, 2006, p. 55). The main task of the Psyops teams taking part in operations was to inform the civilian population, to prevent them caught up in the fighting. Sometimes the teams, occasionally complemented by Civil Affairs, were deployed in local projects with the job of trying to win the trust of the local population. These activities were also developed elsewhere in Afghanistan, but such initiatives were only of a temporary nature (Giustozzi, 2008, p. 191). With a ‘light footprint’, American and NATO troops had neither the capacity nor the intention to hold cleared areas safe for a longer time; the population was rapidly returned to its fate after the operation—hardly the way to promote trust in the coalition troops.

From mid-2003 the balance of images tipped in favor of the Taliban. In particular, in the rural areas of south and east Afghanistan it was evident that the hunt for terrorists was not having the desired effect and was only succeeding in spreading the Taliban’s power and influence. Slowly the realization dawned that the key to success lay not so much in eliminating possible Taliban fighters, but that winning the trust of the Afghan population was essential to eventually defeating the insurgency. Instead of focusing on military might, what was needed was an approach aimed at security and development with an effective communication strategy as its foundation.

3.2. 2003–2006 from counter-terrorism to counterinsurgency: the battle over perception

In 2003 and 2004 the realization grew in the United States that the battle against terrorism and the insurgency had to be fought not only physically on the battlefield, but also ideologically and the arena of communications. Unwelcome though it was, it had to be admitted that this lesson had been mainly learned as a result of the successes of the enemy. In Afghanistan, Taliban commanders sometimes carried out offensive actions which they knew in advance would be lost;
but the influence of those actions on the perception of the population – the demonstration of the lack of security and the strength of the Taliban, as well as the potential exploitation through the media of civilian casualties – outweighed the losses. With their actions the Taliban built on the narrative that Afghanistan was a graveyard for empires and would never be ruled by foreign super powers. Besides influencing international public opinion through the new media, the Taliban also succeeded in their campaign to influence people at the local level. Through manipulation, threats and ‘armed propaganda’ the Taliban managed to intimidate the population. The Taliban also regularly distributed ‘night letters’ among the inhabitants and in public buildings to warn against collaborating with coalition troops or the Afghan government. But from the very beginning the strongest message the Taliban sent was the fact that each time the coalition troops had cleared an area, they returned again. Coalition troops never stayed long and the Taliban were able to wait patiently until the area was delivered over to them once more. The result was that the civilian population became convinced that the coalition troops were there only temporarily and that eventually it was the Taliban who would remain.

This communicative strength of the Taliban was even enhanced by the free fall of the popularity of the American government in the eye of world opinion. As a result of the invasion of Iraq, the dragging conflict in Afghanistan and the violations of human rights in Guantanamo Bay, Bagram and Abu Ghraib public opinion in Muslim countries hardened against the coalition dramatically. This was not least as a result of the influence of the Arabic counterpart of CNN, Al Jazeera, with a viewing audience in the Middle East of some 35–40 million, was able to reach an immense public. The abuses were of course grist to the mill for extremists and led to an enormous loss of credibility, particularly among the Muslim population. American Public Diplomacy initiatives like the launch of the Al-Hurra Television in the Middle East and the Arabic station Al Sawra Radio were incapable of turning the tide. In April 2004, in a reaction to the Al Hurra TV the Jordan Times observed sharply that “[w]hat the United States need to do is change its policy, not its media strategy” (Kuttab, 2004). Moreover, the gulf between the United States and Europe widened as a result of these highly damaging news reports. The abuses not only led to loss of international support but at home too critics began to ask what remained of the legitimacy of the mission.

Finally the dragged out conflict in Afghanistan and an increasing number of civilian deaths led to serious dissatisfaction among the local population over the actions of western troops and a decreasingly positive picture of the future. The coalition troops tried to communicate that their offensive actions were aimed at the Taliban and Al Qaida, but in the eyes of the population that was not the case. It was above all the bombing that caused many civilian deaths, fear and unrest. The local population found that NATO was dishonestly reporting the number of deaths and that civilians were all too often unjustly seen as Taliban fighters. There were also increasingly complaints of the violation of local norms and values, particularly uninvited forcing and entering of Afghan dwellings, while the behavior of troops in relation to Afghan women caused huge offense (Giustozzi, 2008).

3.2.1. Stratcom penetrates through to the political level

In 2003 the American government acknowledged that they were losing the war of communication. In a critical internal report from 2003 which evaluated the influence activities, the Ministry of Defense suggested that the Psops reports were not consistent with national themes and narratives and were primarily reactions to enemy propaganda (United States Department of Defense, 2003). Donald Rumsfeld was later to reflect: “Our enemies have skillfully adapted to fighting wars in today’s media age, but for the most part we, our country, our government has not, […] if for the most part, the U.S. government still functions as a five and dime store in an Ebay world” (New Realities in a Media Age, 2006). A 2004 report on Strategic communication by the Defense Science Board was extremely critical of communication from the political and military sphere. The problem, according to this document, was not so much finding the right message or the right medium, but mainly a fundamental lack of credibility resulting from the policy in practice (Defense Science Board, 2004, p. 3, 41, 46). According to the report, this was not because of the messages, rather “[t]he problem is that our actions speak louder than our words” (Fenton, 2009, p. 92). Conflicting deeds and words simply led to a loss of credibility. Many American policy-makers were nonetheless (mistakenly) convinced that it was not the policy that was the problem but the way in which it was presented (Zaharna, 2010, p. 3).

From 2003, other organizations also commented increasingly on the wide gulf between the goal of the mission on the one hand and the abuses in practice on the other. According to a report by the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (2004), various organizations had been instituted to look at strategic communication—the Office of Global Communication (OGC), the Strategic communication Policy Coordination Committee (PCC) and the Strategic communication Fusion Teams, yet there was no evidence of any coordination at all. The OGC, created in 2003, could show very little by way of performance, said critics, and in 2005 it was wound up. The PCC had only met a few times since its creation in 2002 and by mid-2004 was in fact no longer active. Thus, by late 2005, despite the many recommendations and initiatives there was still no single umbrella organization to coordinate activities in the field of Strategic communication. Yet such an organ and associated central strategy were urgently needed, just as the Defense Science Board had stated in 2004 (p. 11).

3.2.2. Influence in Afghanistan: toward a population-centric approach

In Afghanistan too the years 2003–2006 were characterized by the new insights concerning the conditions for success. With the arrival of General David Barno at the end of 2003 (until mid-2005) as commander of the newly created General Headquarters in Kabul, the counter-terrorism strategy, which had been aimed exclusively at defeating Al Quaida and the Taliban, was slowly transformed into a counterinsurgency, in which the population were crucially important. Through the
revival of counterinsurgency, influence activities gradually shifted their aim, now more focused on the population than the enemy. The publication and wide dissemination of the American Counterinsurgency Field Manual in 2006, in which the principles were prominently stated, contributed enormously to this new awareness. Information Operations and the synchronization of deeds and words formed the core of the new counterinsurgency strategy, but through lack of trained personnel, of knowledge and expertise it took a long time for this to filter down to the lowest levels (Cox, 2006). Nevertheless, the troops on the ground also saw that the so-called ‘kinetic operations’ which caused civilian casualties or in which houses were destroyed had a disastrous impact on the attitude and perception of the population. Most commanders were now aware of the potentially negative impact of military actions on the Afghan population and – albeit on a modest scale – made an effort to achieve results by non-kinetic means. At that time, however, such activities were not yet associated with Stratcom. The deployment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) is a good example. PRTs are a highly suitable means of convincing the local population of the coalition’s good intentions and of assuring the home front of the humanitarian aspect of the mission. Although the PRTs, according to their own terms of reference, do not have the specific aim of influencing, their activities nevertheless form part of Stratcom. But this is only realized by a few. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Brouns, at that time a Stratcom officer of ISAF, the military operations carried out were still inadequately supported by Information Operations: “our approach must recognise that the support of the populace is the operations center of gravity and is the key to strategic success [...] ‘influencing ought to be the main effort’” (Brouns, 2007, p. 1). According to Brouns counterinsurgency actually depends not on a population-centric approach, but rather a perception-centric approach (Brouns, 2010). However, it was not until the end of 2006 that the first major operation was carried out in Afghanistan in which this was realized.

That operation, Operation Baaz Tsuka (Falcon Summit) led by RC-South in de Panjawi valley near Kandahar, began in December 2006. During that period RC-South was under the command of the Dutch General Ton van Loon. Baaz Tsuka was the first large-scale operation in Afghanistan in which no physical main goal was set, but in which its effects on the perceptions of the population were the most important consideration. The operation was a logical consequence of Operation Medusa several months earlier. During that operation, it is true, several tactical successes were notched up and the Taliban was defeated, but the destroyed infrastructure and the large number of civilians killed in the process meant that the net effect of the operation was counter-productive: the image of ISAF was radically worsened. Various civilians, human rights organizations and the Afghan president Hamid Karzai protested to NATO at the large number of civilian victims. International public opinion had similarly registered the scale of the violence and the resultant suffering of the Afghan people. Although the term Stratcom was not yet used at the time, an awareness developed within the ISAF organization that their operations in Afghanistan were being closely scrutinized both back home and abroad.

The core of operation Baaz Tsuka was developed by the British Information Operations officer of RC-South and was aimed at the local unemployed men who did not support the Taliban but, whether under duress, out of boredom or for money, were used by the Taliban to fight in the Panjawi valley (Anonymous ISAF-officer, personal communication, 2010). The aim was to separate this group of ‘day fighters’ from the insurgency. The expectation was that if this group of local men were to abandon their support for the Taliban, the Taliban would not have sufficient fighting capacity to be able to continue their fight with the coalition troops in the Panjawi. Before the operation, therefore, discussions were held with tribal leaders who had control over the day-fighters, during the course of which the local leaders made it clear that they had had enough of all the violence. ISAF wanted to convince these leaders both through conversation and reconstruction activities that it was in both their interests that the local population should cease fighting for the Taliban. As an alternative, ISAF was prepared to accept the day-fighters in a local militia of the Afghan National Police (ANP) to improve security. As well as the influence operations, offensive operations were planned to eliminate the hardline Taliban fighters. Several units were to close off the valley at the southern and eastern sides, after which an offensive would launched from the north. The planned offensive activities, however, were to be of a ‘surgical’ nature, thus sparing as far as possible the local population. The result of the operation was the most part successful. During the operation it seems there was a great deal of cooperation and consultation between ISAF and the local population. Furthermore, ISAF troops carried out reconstruction tasks during Baaz Tsuka, food was distributed and a NGOs consulted. The houses destroyed during the earlier Operation Medusa were rebuilt. Just as hoped, the day-fighters did not take up their arms and there were hardly any gunfights, although in the end the ISAF failed to persuade the local men to join a local militia. Equally disappointing, the hardline Taliban fighters in the Panjawi declined to engage in battle and simply left the combat theatre, thus avoiding suffering a decisive blow.

The main thing was that for the first time in Afghanistan the plan produced by the Information Operations branch directed the operation while the military effort had only a supporting role. This had not been seen before (Anonymous ISAF-officer, personal communication, 2010). Although history would subsequently teach us that the conflict in the Panjawi had not yet ended, a significant result of the avoidance of civilian casualties, the involvement of local leaders and the intensive reconstruction effort was the approach adopted by the coalition troops of RC-South attracted considerable praise internationally. After the negative publicity incurred by Operation Medusa, Baaz Tsuka could be seen as an international Stratcom success.

3.3. 2006–2010 strategic communication and divided public opinion

Up to this point the term ‘strategic communication’ had been mainly used in the United States, but from mid-2006 the importance was realized of having univocality of communication and policy in other countries too. One of the causes of this
realization was the difficult discussions and the major divisions occasioned by the extension of ISAF in Afghanistan. With the completion of ISAF stage III in August and stage IV in October NATO had taken over the leading role in Afghanistan. But whereas the American people had been overwhelmingly positive in their view of the mission ever since its inception, in many European countries it was far from self-evident that the mission enjoyed public support. They were ready to support reconstruction and stabilization, but in countries like Italy, Spain and Germany there was little public support for any involvement in combat actions. A skeptical public opinion in several countries was reflected in the large number of national caveats and political division over the nature of the mission. While a number of countries talked about a counterinsurgency, this term was not used in other countries to describe the mission, or was deliberately avoided in favor of talk about a ‘post-conflict reconstruction mission’. Moreover, between the different countries there were very different ideas over how the operation should be executed. NATO had the unenviable task of molding a single strategy out of all these diverse views and communicating this to an international public. It was not obvious what the contribution of the various NATO countries should be, and when it became clear in the spring of 2006 that the Taliban’s strength had actually increased over the course of the years and that the troops were now regularly being engaged in combat, the critical noises from the European public grew ever louder. These developments, partly prompted by the developments on the ground in Afghanistan, led the then Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General James Jones, to decide that Stratcom tasks should be embedded in the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), NATO’s highest military organ. In March 2007 Mark Lyait, already thoroughly experienced in the field communications policy, assumed the position of first head of the Office of Strategic Communication (OCS). At first he was alone, but his bureau would later be expanded to include five persons. The initiative was taken over at NATO’s political headquarters in Brussels where the Public Diplomacy Division quickly added Stratcom to its list of main tasks. Shortly thereafter, the first Stratcom directives were published. The document ‘Enhancing NATO’s Strategic communications’ appeared on 31 October 2007, followed a year later by a Strategic communication directive from SHAPE in which the support of the home front was emphasized. In an unpublished NATO report from May 2007 it was already acknowledged that strategic success in Afghanistan depended on the political will of the participating countries. Above all, according to this document, the understanding of the international public for the importance of the mission was vital for its success. The most important conclusion was that NATO must develop a consistent narrative and that all operations and actions had to conform to that narrative (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, 2008).

In 2007 the first interagency document appeared in the United States, produced by the Strategic communication and Public Diplomacy Policy Coordinating Committee under the leadership of Karen Hughes. In January 2008 the Defense Science Board similarly published a new document on Strategic communication in which it was concluded that while progress had been achieved since the previous publication on the subject 2004, there was still much room for improvement (p. xi, 2, 4). Since then, many initiatives have been unfurled and various organs created, but not all of these have been a success. For example there was criticism of the lack of a clear, univocal definition and any concrete implementation. While it was acknowledged that the American policy had had an influence on international public opinion, critics wondered what had actually been done to improve this image. It was true that the newly created Strategic communication Integration Group (SCIG) and the Strategic communication Secretariat were contributing to the development of Stratcom policy aimed at countering the propaganda of Al Qaida and the Taliban, but they also created additional layers of hierarchy.

3.3.1. Implementation of Stratcom in Afghanistan

The influence activities that the coalition troops in Afghanistan had so far conducted had been mainly directed at the opponent and the Afghan population itself and had not specifically taken into account either international public opinion or the support of their own home front. This changed in mid-2008. At the end of 2007 the US Ministry of Defense had already written a plan for the implementation of Stratcom in Afghanistan in which as many as twelve different target audiences were identified. This was followed by the ISAF Theatre Strategic Communications Strategy in 2008. In that document too it was argued that a coherent strategy and the coordination of Public Affairs, Psyops, Information Operations and Key Leader Engagement were needed in order to gain the local population’s support and confidence in the Afghan government, the retention of international support and the undermining of support for the insurgents. To achieve this, important principles needed to be recognized, such as: ‘Unity of Voice’ and ‘Ensuring Actions match Words’. The NATO Allied Joint Force Command in Brunssum, responsible for the coordination of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, implemented Stratcom within the organization by setting up the Information & Influence Branch on 1 September 2008. Despite all the initiative and guidelines, actual implementation of those initiatives followed only fitfully. Thus, despite the new guidelines, there was hardly any coordination in Afghanistan between the personnel of Public Affairs and units charged with implementing the influence activities, such as Psyops (Anonymous senior HQ ISAF officer, personal communication, 2010). In particular, there were concerns in the Public Affairs organization that discontinuing the strict separation between influencing foreign target groups and providing information in their own country would lead to loss of integrity and credibility. Secondly, although master narratives of the ISAF mission were disseminated within the Public Affairs organization, these had only a limited impact at the lower levels. Not only were personnel at Task Force level in Public Affairs getting these narratives from NATO, they also had to contend with the national interests of various political parties at home, each with their own agenda. Moreover, the narratives were only disseminated among the personnel of Public Affairs where they served as lines of communication and guidelines for dealing with the media; the ISAF narrative never reached the troops on the ground and was never used in the planning and execution of operations at the lower levels.
3.3.2. 2009: the arrival of General McChrystal

Already toward the end of 2008 General David McKiernan had had a try at harmonizing the different communication and influence activities, but had abandoned this attempt when it met with heavy criticism. The arrival of General Stanley McChrystal as commander of ISAF in the summer of 2009 provided the needed impetus to implement Stratcom in Afghanistan. The principles of General McChrystal over counterinsurgency and the population-centric approach were not new; in fact he was elaborating on the existing ideas of his predecessors. According to one of his immediate staff members, however, he raised counterinsurgency to an entirely different level: “it was not that his ideas were revolutionary, but there was better implementation” (Anonymous senior HQ ISAF officer, personal communication, 2010). This was mainly due to the fact that he did no confine his ideas to orders on paper, but rather strove for an aggressive application of the counterinsurgency principles. His initial assessment on 30 August 2009 was a foretaste of the policy he would pursue: “ISAF is not adequately executing the basics of counterinsurgency warfare”, he wrote, “[the] concepts are not new. However implemented aggressively, they will be revolutionary to our effectiveness” (McChrystal, 2009, p. 7, 9). Strategic communication considered General McChrystal to be “a vital contribution to the overall effort.” Beside the primary target group, the Afghan people, wrote McChrystal, public opinion in the participant countries, as well as international opinion, was crucial for the success of the mission.

Secondly, General McChrystal stressed even more strongly the fact that perceptions were not determined by words but by deeds. The crux of Stratcom was therefore that words and actions must be attuned to each other: “for GiROA and ISAF to win the battle of perceptions we must demonstrably change behaviour and actions on the ground” (McChrystal, 2009, p. 42). McChrystal also put this into practice with complementary directives that actually restricted the number of aerial bombardments, the use of violence and aggressive night raids. In practice too he followed his own rules, declining to wear body armor or carry weapons in his conversations with local leaders and the people. According to General McChrystal this gave a signal of trust and at the same time communicated that he attached no more value to his own life than to that of Afghans.

Thirdly, he managed what his predecessors had failed to achieve: at the headquarters in Kabul he forced the Information Operations community and Public Affairs to work together. The new Deputy Chief of Staff Communications, Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, had also arrived in Afghanistan at the same time as General McChrystal. Despite opposite, but with McChrystal’s support, Rear Admiral Smith managed to get the relevant officials of the ISAF headquarters to cooperate and to ensure that all messages—influence activities and media publications—were ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’ (Anonymous senior HQ ISAF officer, personal communication, 2010). Since then, all conversations with key leaders and disseminated messages have been scrupulously kept in a database at headquarters. As a result, the possibility of unintentionally conflicting messages has been minimized.

General McChrystal’s ideas were prominent in the run up to the large-scale ISAF Operation Moshtarak (‘together: the name is a message in itself’) begun in February 2010 in the Helmand Province. Never before had the no structurally coordinated conformity of words and deeds communication strategy played such a major role in the preparatory stage of an operation (Lieutenant-Colonel van Helvert, personal communication, 2010). Because Public Affairs was involved in the planning in advance and was better informed the international media briefings could be proactive. In addition, the Afghan population was informed well before the launch of the operation. In the first phase of the operation Key Leader Engagement-activities were undertaken under the command of Special Forces and the Task Force Helmand Influence Cell and throughout the operation the need to restrict violence was continuously stressed. The fact that McChrystal brought President Hamid Karzai in and let him give the formal start signal for the operation was of enormous symbolic value. Despite these successes, however, the influence activities have naturally had only a temporary effect. In the end, the most important message would be the creation of a credible and effective local administration that can guarantee the permanent security of the citizens.

3.3.3. Strategic communication: where are we now?

In 2007 the then Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop-Scheffer still had critical words for the communication activities of NATO: “When it comes to video, we are frankly in the stone age. NATO has no ability to gather video from the field, to show people what is happening. We are also bare on the field when it comes to the web” (Hoop Scheffer, 2007). Since then NATO has become active on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube, has its own website and television station and is working on applications for the Iphone. Videos and images of NATO operations are declassified and made openly available to the public in order to counter the Taliban’s propaganda. As a consequence of ever more images recorded during operations, whether by combat camera teams, helmet cameras or aerial platforms, unjustified claims by the Taliban are increasingly often being refuted. The United States continues its progressive policy with academic and military publications, the implementation of proposals such as the creation of the Counterterrorism Communication Center and digital outreach teams, the installation of the ‘media hubs’ in Brussels, London and Dubai and the intensification of cultural exchange initiatives. Other ISAF countries are following in the American footsteps.

The British mission in Helmand transformed its strategy during 2006–2009 from an enemy-centric approach to a focus on influence operations. At the same time, since the appointment of Major General Gordon Messenger in December 2009 there was for the first a Strategic communications Officer active in the British Defense Staff. A next step might perhaps be the appointment of an interdepartmentally placed functionary. In the Netherlands too there have been initiatives in this area. Since 2005 there has been increasing investment in Public Diplomacy. Several (unofficial) publications have been published within the Defense organization on Stratcom and in 2007 a settlement memorandum was written from within the Defense Staff which outlined the importance of an interdepartmental structure of consultation at the political-strategic
level to formulate an information strategy for all operations in which the Dutch armed forces participate. For the first time, in the order for the last rotation of soldiers to Urugzan, a supplement was included on Strategic communication. Unfortunately the initiatives are still coming mainly from Defense and have not yet been fully assimilated by the political class. Nor is there yet any unified, all-embracing policy; the different departments and embassies mostly interpret it in their own way. This is unfortunate. Now could be the right moment precisely because discussion of the mission in Afghanistan is so difficult.

With the creation of the Information Communication Coordination Cell (IC3), the Joint Force Command in Brunssum in August 2010, has given Stratcom a more prominent position in the organization. The IC3 was set up following the need to improve the process of communication on the initiative of the British Air Marshal Christopher Harper, the acting commander of the Joint Force Command. IC3 advises key civilian functionaries and military commanders on Stratcom and on media briefing before their deployment in Afghanistan. Furthermore, it coordinates all communication activities from the JFC, not only of the traditional specialists but also of other prominent officials such as the political adviser and the commander. There has also been progress in Afghanistan itself. Whereas in ISAF’s beginning period the process of communication at headquarters was led by a major, the current head of the ISAF Directorate of Communication is a two-star general. Public Affairs and media-teams communicate over their operations via Twitter and blogs and the blocks against the military to prevent them writing about their experiences are increasingly being lifted. Influence cells, Information Operations functionaries and Stratcom officers are embedded in the ISAF structure at different levels. The Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC), which constitutes the nucleus of the headquarters of ISAF from 2011, has identified influence as the core activity of military action. In a recent experiment during an exercise, the staff unit integrated the various different influence operations such as Information Operations, Key Leader Engagement, Cyber Operations, Counter Propaganda and Reconciliation/Reintegration with the planning process of Public Affairs. Strategic communication, and in particular the conformity of word and deed, constitute the basic starting point for the operations.

4. Discussion

Throughout the war in Afghanistan the field of strategic communication has seen a lot of progress. Although the process of the further introduction of Stratcom at the end of 2010 is in full swing, and notwithstanding all the progress so far, it has to date not been fully adopted in the ISAF organization. I argue there are two reasons for this. Firstly, NATO still lacks a central a central Stratcom strategy including a common narrative and there still seems to be no national Stratcom policy within the different participant ISAF countries. Only recently, in August 2010, did the NATO’s highest political organ, the North Atlantic Council agree on a first formal document over Stratcom: the ‘Military Concept for NATO Strategic communications’. In this document, however, one finds no univocal working definition: that is, even at the highest level, Stratcom still stands in need of further explication and agreement. Nor do different conceptions within NATO countries contribute to an efficient and unequivocal acceptance of Stratcom principles. Thus, the United States and NATO encourage soldiers to blog (within set guidelines), to twitter and via other social media to talk about their mission, but in other countries such as Germany the law forbids this.

Some scholars question, however, whether the west with all the different interests in play is even capable of producing a coherent common narrative. In contrast to the narrative incoherence of the West, the terrorist organization Al Qaida has a simple and highly effective message: join the global Jihad. Since the very beginning of the Afghan mission there have been differences of opinion between western countries about the nature of the conflict and the goal of the civilian–military effort. Nor is the division any less among the political parties within the different participant countries. Political parties are seldom in agreement over the nature of the contribution to the mission and differences of opinion are often openly fought out via the media. Wherever some consensus is reached the question remains as to how long it will last, a question that becomes all the more acute when there are setbacks or when there are a large number of casualties. And how likely is it that a common narrative of the mission can survive a political crisis or conflicting internal party-political interests during election campaigns? Questions of sending in foreign troops, as well as counter-terrorism policy, lend themselves supremely to opportunistic party-politicizing; it is rarely a purely technocratic process of political policy decision-making. Also, states have noticed there is a great gulf between internal domestic opinion and the message they want to send out to the local population. How is it possible to promise the people at home to bring ‘our boys’ back as soon as possible while maintaining in the mission area that the forces are to stay until the job is done? Besides, the electorate at home is not particularly receptive to reports put out by the government, they are all too easily dismissed as spin or propaganda. How can the significance of a bloody, dragged out conflict in a part of the world thousands of kilometres away be conveyed in words?

The inconsistencies in the political policy, the diffuse account of the nature and character of the mission and the different views held by the different participant countries are not only fatal from the political point of view, but also provide wonderful propaganda material for our opponents. A good example of this was the wrangling in the Netherlands after the fall of the last Cabinet over the decision of whether or not to extend the Dutch mission in Urugzan. Despite urgent requests from NATO and the US, Dutch troops were withdrawn from the mission area. Openly congratulating the Dutch government, and the wish that more countries would follow the Dutch example, the Taliban were able to draw attention to the split in the coalition.

Further, the question is whether the West with all its layers of bureaucracy and hierarchy is actually capable of successfully countering a flexible and razor-sharp opponent. Terrorist organizations and insurgencies are not bound by the guidelines of ethical reporting and can send out their reports on the airwaves based on half-truths and untruths. In order to gain sympathy and support among their supporters and to widen the split with the government they continually try to broadcast western actions in injustice frames. That is, whether or not by exploiting the media, both government activities and activities of the
coalition troops are deliberately framed by placing them in a context that will delegitimize them. This result is to put the West in a dilemma—a choice between speed and accuracy of reporting. If western troops first conduct an extensive investigation before presenting our version, it is questionable whether this is at all effective, since the incidents have occurred several days earlier and have already been widely exploited by the opponent. By the time the investigation is rounded off and presented it no longer has much news value. On the other hand, if the report is rapidly produced and contains untruths this can destroy western credibility.

A second reason for concluding that Stratcom has not yet been fully inoculated is that although the principles of Stratcom are indeed recognized by politicians and the military establishment, they have not yet percolated down to the units on the ground. Because Stratcom remains stuck, as it were, at the higher levels the progress that is being achieved at the moment is mainly in developments in communication policy, in technical applications and the formulation of new policy. But I argue that only when the principles of Stratcom penetrate to the lowest levels and the narrative is adopted vertically throughout the entire organization, only then can words and deeds be mutually attuned. At present that is not the case. According to Thomas Brouns (personal communication, 2010), a former Strategic communication officer of Joint Force Command in Brunssum, we have to realize that everyone is involved in Stratcom: “So while what PSYOPS soldiers are doing is important, in a sense, every individual needs to be a PSYOPS soldier. How is what I am doing going to be perceived in the long run? This is from the individual interacting with the Afghan villager, to the General selecting a course of action at HQ.” However, for a soldier trained to fight and to think in terms of concrete results, it is not easy to change his terms of reference to such intangibles as the perceptions of the local population. For many in the military, influence is the domain of Information Operations, something mysterious that is the responsibility of Psyops specialists. There is inadequate awareness that everything the forces do or let happen gives off a signal. It is assumed that when unpleasant or tragic incidents occur—which are the angry reaction of civilians to coalition troop behavior—a few Psyps specialists will be brought in to iron things out. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Gradus Kruitwagen (personal communication, 2009), a Dutch Information Operations officer, the following pronunciation of a junior coalition officer in Afghanistan illustrates this common lack of the right mindset at the executive level: “I am ready to die in a fight with the Taliban, but not distributing flyers in the city.” One of the many other examples is an event in 2009 in the south of Afghanistan: an infantry unit arrived for the second time in a mission area and painted their traditional logo, a large death’s head, on the vehicles. During the mission, however, the unit had to serve as security for a PRT. Obviously the death’s head was not exactly compatible with the task they had been given. Only when ordered to do so from higher command did the company remove the logo (ISAF-officer, personal communication, 2010). Fortunately there are other examples in which the power of influence is clearly recognized at the lower levels. For example, the commander of the first marine detachment of the Task Force Uruzgan took the initiative in 2009 of no longer patrolling on foot or in armored vehicles, but on bicycles. Although this was sometimes slightly ridiculed by the media, it is in fact the very essence. Images of marines on bicycles say more about security, not only to the local people but to the home front too, than any spokesperson from Defense can.

On the other hand, it may be wondered how realistic it is to expect that western cross-culture communication efforts, the approaches and the influences activities, are capable of being squared with what forces are actually doing. 'Winning hearts and minds’ has become all but a cliché, but the question is still whether western troops are capable of it. Contrary to the conclusions about effective Stratcom of theorists, there remains a fundamental inability to grasp that many of the messages do not escape the western mindset: they are ‘sender-oriented’, whereas it is the effect that these messages have in the minds of the ‘receiver’ that is the crux of the entire effort. Is it possible for a soldier who has had only a few weeks’ preparation, in a completely different culture with wholly different rules of communication, to really exert influence on his interlocutor? Do soldiers get in Afghanistan the perceived status of the speaker, the timing of our messages and the use of local metaphors in our messages are mostly far more persuasive than the content of our messages? And is it realistic to think that the local people are going to form an attachment with a troop force that rotates every few months—a force that is not so much concerned about the population but mainly desires to prevent casualties on their own side? It is also difficult to assess whether all deliberate influence activities have any effect. Is it not the case that the perception of the local population in Afghanistan is 99% determined by actions and scarcely at all by messages? Can a friendly conversation, or laying on the provision of water, or a Psyps leaflet cancel out the feelings of anger, fear and revenge after the loss of family members as a result of bombing or following humiliating treatment during a house search?

It is not easy to answer these questions. Of course some progress has been achieved, for example with the decentralization of Public Affairs activities, the involvement of influential local key leaders and the realization that Stratcom is more than simply putting out positive messages. The problems raised above are not intended to be a call to abandon the principle of Stratcom, but what is important is to be aware that it demands an enormous investment. At the same time, Stratcom should not create unreal expectations. There is the danger that too much value could be attached to Stratcom and that it could become seen as a corrective panacea against faulty policy or misconceived actions. Stratcom is in the end no substitute for an overall strategy, it is merely a supporting process. Not even the best communication and influence strategies are able to counter an unpopular policy or problematic actions. Or, as the first rule of advertising: If you have a poor product, not even the best advertising will sell it. The American army leader Admiral Mike Mullen (2009, p. 4) in fact warns that Stratcom should not serve as a disguise for bad policy or operational faults: “In fact, I would argue that most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all. They are policy and execution problems”. Nor is Stratcom a one-way street, it not simply the ‘selling’ of the mission. What is decisive for the mission is the goal, whether that is meaningful and important and whether it is achieved in a just manner. Therefore crafting a compelling narrative is not good presentational
skills or a strategy in itself. Freedman (2006) concludes that if a convincing narrative can be constructed, that will normally be because the underlying strategy is sound and because it speaks to established belief systems.

5. Conclusion

Strategic communication is a complex, many-faceted phenomenon. Everything turns on perception: the perception of the local population, the perception of an international public, of the home front and of all other relevant target groups. “We cannot kill or capture our way to victory”, Robert Gates (2008a) once said, “Ultimate success or failure will increasingly depend more on shaping the behavior of others—Friends and adversaries, and most importantly, the people in between” (2008b). Their support, trust and belief in the mission is a precondition for success. These insights are not new. The ability to influence opinions at home and in the mission area has always been a crucial factor in conflicts. Terrorism and insurgency have also from time immemorial been seen as a form of communication, a dramatic appeal for attention. In an interview in 1997 Osama Bin Laden once described terrorism as a message with no words. At its core it is a form of strategic communication designed to influence political processes and decisions. The insurgents in Afghanistan similarly consider Stratcom as the central aim of their operations. “[The Taliban] are not fighting a war that involves military victories,” remarked ISAF Rear Admiral Gregory Smith in 2010, “everything they do is to create a perception that the government can’t win” (Londoño, 2010). But the policy of those fighting terrorism and the activities of counterinsurgents is also a form of communication, not only by sending messages but above all through the activities which directly or indirectly influence various different target groups. A new phenomenon which is characteristic of the present-day conflicts is the interrelatedness of these different target groups. Paradoxically enough, as a result of the new media there is an increased cultural awareness and deeper differentiation between these groups, yet at the same time there is a single, global listening audience.

The principles of Stratcom have been put into practice, learning all the while in the process. NATO has appropriated them, partly inspired by the communication successes of her enemies. During the first years in Afghanistan there was in fact still no question of Stratcom; influence activities were not coordinated within a single coherent process or consistent with an overarching compelling narrative and were mainly aimed at the enemy. In that period there was no conception of an interactive way of influencing a target group. The main method used was by means of mass influence activities, such as leaflet drops and radio broadcasts. Other perceptions were hardly taken into account at all, such as those of the local population, international skepticism or the electorate at home. With the failure of success to materialize and the transformation into a counterinsurgency campaign, from 2003 onwards the coalition troops turned attention to the local population and it was realized that the mission was being closely scrutinized by international public opinion. Yet despite this, the Stratcom activities were still not being coordinated in an integrated manner. They remained the incidental activities of specialists. In mid-2006, with the growing criticism and questioning of the legitimacy of the mission and the strenuous discussions within European countries over the contribution to ISAF, Stratcom became established in the United States and the European NATO countries. This was the period when it was realized that the communication strategy had to be aimed at all the relevant target groups—and that these were implicated with each other. At the same time it also became clear that the necessary support of the electorate of these countries could not be taken for granted.

In the meantime, Stratcom has been implemented in Afghanistan, albeit so far only at the highest levels. Although there has been progress over the past years there remains a great deal of obscurity and ignorance over the project and there is still no uniform understanding of what it entails. The main aim of this paper is to contribute to the comprehension of the concept. With the examination of the Stratcom efforts during the mission in Afghanistan I intended to clarify that Stratcom is not only a matter of deliberate exercises in communication on the highest levels, but also about the unwittingly sent messages by words and deeds on the level of execution. Besides which, it remains the case that there has been no implementation of any structure for the coordinated conformity of words and deeds at these levels. Nonetheless, it may be anticipated that with developments in the area of communication and connectivity, the importance of Stratcom will steadily increase in the coming years and that the principles will also penetrate to the lowest levels. According to a RAND report it all revolves ultimately around influence activities at the executive level: “The messages communicated by political leaders, upper military echelons, and tactical psychological operations units ultimately face a reality test at ground level” (Helmus, Paul, & Glenn, 2007, p. 2). There is an increasing awareness that the primary strategic communicators are our men on the ground, for it is after all their activities that convey the principal message: “the act is the message” (Sutphin, 2010). This is why the implementation of a coherent narrative by the entire organization is fundamental, not least for our largest group of strategic communicators: the soldiers of our armed forces who are sent out all over the world.

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