STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN COUNTER INSURGENCY OPERATIONS (COIN)

Afifa Kiran

Abstract

The concept of strategic communication evolved in the West to understand/engage foreign audiences and influence the targeted population for the support of their overseas military operations. It is regarded as an instrument of statecraft to facilitate the governments in order to influence the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of stakeholders, non-state groups, neutrals, in support of national security policies. In this premise, this paper discusses the role of strategic communication in counter insurgency operations.

Introduction

During the cold war era, power blocks were involved in direct confrontation with each other. Both the United States and other Western powers (Britain, most notably) developed a robust infrastructure for waging a ‘‘war of ideas’’ against the communist ideology being promulgated by the Soviet Union and its allies. But 21st century conflicts are very different from 20th century conflicts. Counterinsurgency (COIN), terrorism and counterterrorism (CT), foreign internal defense (FID), psychological operations (PSYOP), civil military operations (CMO), strategic communication, information operations (IO), intelligence and counterintelligence activities have become key elements in formulation the polices, strategies, and operations of present-day governments confronting
the irregular adversaries which demand hardheaded approaches to deal with.

21st century conflicts/wars are moving into fourth generation warfare, which cannot be won with high tech weapons alone. In the past also, this form of war has defeated the French in Vietnam and Algeria, and USSR in Afghanistan. It continues to bleed Russia in Chechnya and United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in other countries against Al-Qaeda network. These wars are against the enemies/insurgents who seek to change the social order by manipulating people and reallocate power within the country while enjoying the support of local population. To win these insurgencies, unfortunately COIN approaches, which have been evolved over the years against these insurgents, are generally confined to successful deployment of hard power and giving less importance to the fact that influence and management of perceptions of population within the conflict zone is key for successful COIN operations. Although, there is a growing realization at all levels that local population’s support to the insurgents or militants has to be cut off by placing strategic communication, public diplomacy, at the centre of pre and post conflict reconstruction process but at grounds, it lacks clarity.

Few years back, the concept of strategic communication evolved in the West to understand/engage foreign audiences and influence the targeted population for the support of their overseas military operations. It is regarded as an instrument of statecraft to facilitate the governments involved in COIN to influence the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of stakeholders, non-
state groups, neutrals, in support of national security policies. In simpler term, it refers to the reestablishing the government writ/control and institutionalizing reforms during and after an armed operation by the state.

**Defining Strategic Communication (SC)**

To understand the concept of SC, one has to see it as an instrument of national power beside others elements: diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) to achieve the national objectives in post conflict/insurgency scenario.

**Definition**

According to the Defense Science Board (DSB) of US, SC is an interactive process and coherent set of activities which include:-

- **Understanding** identities, attitudes, behaviors and cultures; media trends and information flows; social and influence networks; political, social, economic and religious motivations.

- **Advising** policymakers, diplomats, and military leaders on public opinion implications of policy choices.

- **Engaging** in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions through programs that support the national interest,

- **Influencing** attitudes and behavior through communication strategies supported by a broad range of government and civil society activities.

- **Measuring** the impact of activities.
Evolution of Term SC

The need for this concept emerged when it was felt that traditional dividing lines between public affairs, public diplomacy, and military information operations are blurred in operational environment because of immediate access to information. The current information revolution in military affairs, is part of a broader revolution with political, economic and social dimensions. SC is being shaped by profound changes in technology, perhaps most notably in the area of information technology. However, to deal with future complex social communication systems, SC is still in the process and under intense debate among policy makers. Some military analysts argue that although, the phrase “Strategic Communication” has gotten very popular lately but there has also been writing about strategic communication in government for years, though not by that exact name. A 1957 book by Dyer is, titled, Political Communication as an Instrument of State. In 1964 social science luminaries Morton Deutsch, John C. Harsanyi, Harold H. Kelley, Anatol Rapoport, and Thomas Schelling edited a volume called Strategic Interaction and Conflict: Original Papers and Discussion. In preceding para, we can sum up the evolution of SC concepts over the years as under:-

- Enemy or combat propaganda (WW1)
- Political Warfare (UK)
- Psychological Warfare (US, WW2)
- Psychological Operations (1950s onwards)
Strategic Communication in Counter Insurgency Operations (COIN)

- Information Warfare (1991-6)
- Information Operations (1996 to present)
- Perception Management (post 9/11)
- Strategic Communication (SC) (2004-)

Components of Strategic Communication.

To comprehend and develop further clarity on the subject and its role in post conflict or armed operation, it is important to differentiate SC from other similar concepts of communication strategies and psychological operations in warfare. Most scholars merge this term with Public diplomacy and see it in the prism of information operations. There are five primary supporting capabilities for SC:

- Public Affairs (PA)
- Information Operations (IO)
- PSYOP
- Visual Information (VI)
- Military Diplomacy (MD)
- Defense support to Public Diplomacy.

The military uses SC as an integrating term for above-mentioned capabilities. These capabilities are distinguished from information operations capabilities that include electronic warfare, computer network operations, covert psychological operations, military deception, and operational security. Information operations (IO) is a term to include Computer Network Operations (Computer Network Attack and Defense), Electronic Warfare, Operational Security, Military Deception, and PSYOP Strategic
In Information Operations (IO), those capabilities are often non-kinetic, sometimes non-lethal, and often aimed at processes within systems that is, behavioral effects aimed at cognitive processes. Often networked globally, SC both informs and influences, synchronizing and deconflicting PA and IO themes and messages\(^6\). In the other words, strategic communication focuses on the cognitive dimension of the information environment\(^7\). Communication, which is both message and action, provides the means to harness the elements of national power in an effective manner. It involves all elements of national power: diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME). Strategic communication processes and supporting capabilities must be included in “all aspects of the federal government’s activities and synchronized vertically and horizontally.”\(^8\)

**Strategic Communication Process.**

Effective application of SC does not simply involve a source transmitting to an audience, but rather active engagement between parties. This engagement modes are derived from the policy, strategic vision, campaign plan and operational design. Strategic Communication as a process is continuous.\(^9\) This involves research, planning, execution, monitoring and assessing the effects on targeted population and involves coordination at two ends:-

- **Horizontal coordination.** Among Government agencies
- **Vertical coordination** (up and down the chain of command).

This process ensures the following:-
Strategic Communication in Counter Insurgency Operations (COIN)

- Policy planning, while keeping in view the cultural, informational, and communication considerations.
- The potential communication impacts of both kinetic and non-kinetic actions - their likely "perception effects" - are assessed and planned for before the actions are taken;
- Soft power" options and capabilities are given equal priority and considered in coordination with hard power alternatives.

Targeted population/ audience include friendly elements, stakeholders, non-state groups, neutrals, competitors, and adversaries. In sum, Strategic communication process involves actors including army, Government communication agencies, local media, and Law enforcement agencies at all levels, from the operational level of war to the policy making level. This will enhance targeted population support for major military operations, shape the environment to prevent conflict through influencing the minds of neutrals, stake holders, locals, and to some extent miscreants and during the armed operation, SC will ensure favorable environment for the realization of national security interests of the state.

**Does Pakistan Need SC policy?**

In last few years, Pakistan has developed comprehensive counter terrorism/insurgency polices aimed at “clear, control and build to deal with terrorists/extremists within the country. Since then, armed forces are conducting successful armed operations
against the militants. However, Pakistan is far behind in handling the post-armed operations situation effectively. Use of force against militancy within the country is a difficult task particularly when it has some ideological basis. Such operations have always some risk of locals’ support to extremist’s ideology against the govt besides other social-economic reasons. For Pakistan, SC can be used to mobilize publics in support of major policy initiatives and to support objectives before, during, and after a conflict.

**Strategic Communication Plan for Pakistan.**

Strategic communication is a vital tool in the 21st century information environment. As Pakistan is facing many violent situations in many part of the country and using force to curb the menace. In such unpredictable environment, it is necessary to maintain popular support and insurgent-population isolation. SC is prerequisites for any successful counterinsurgency. Therefore, it should be the top priority of the Pakistani government to achieve its objectives in such undesired situations. An effective strategic communication plan requires continued population support for the government in its armed operations against the militants and isolate themselves from the insurgents’ cause and activities. The nine "fundamental tenets" for Pakistan’s SC plan should be based on principles identified by Naval War Collage USA in 2008,

- **Leadership-driven:** leaders must decisively engage and drive SC processes
- **Credible:** perception of truthfulness and respect between all parties
Strategic Communication in Counter Insurgency Operations (COIN)

- **Dialogue**: multi-faceted exchange of ideas to promote understanding and build relationships
- **Unity of Effort**: integrated and coordinated, vertically and horizontally
- **Responsive**: right audience, right message, right time, and right place
- **Understanding**: deep comprehension of attitudes, cultures, identities, behavior, history, perspectives and social systems. What we say, do, or show may not be what others hear or see
- **Pervasive**: every action, image, and word sends a message
- **Results-Based**: actions to achieve specific outcomes in pursuit of a well-articulated end-state.
- **Continuous**: diligent ongoing research, analysis, planning, execution, and assessment that feeds planning and action.

**Conclusion**

Strategic communication is not the silver bullet, but it does present the possibility for a more tightly focused informational contribution to the strength of the other instruments of national power to achieve national strategies.\(^{10}\) Today, Pakistan is facing intensified conflict within the country and increasingly complex regional security situation. It is safe to say that in the war against violent extremism, SC is all about engaging the enemy in the battle of ideas. Our government and military efforts are marred by a lack
of resources, interagency cooperation, and coordinated strategy. Pakistan public diplomacy is much weaker in identifying the mission and the strategy, and it fails to address the crucial function of public diplomacy in armed conflict. In Pakistan’s case, Strategic Communication is more than disseminating of information but the active solicitation of stakeholders’ perspectives. By making SC centre of future strategies against militancy would facilitate the government and military to address human factors such as sociology, psychology, culture, behavior, and politics, and help building consensus and partnerships for national policy.

Notes

3 ibid
4 Steven R. Corman, Strategic Communication by Any Other Name,( COMOPS journal 2010 , Consortium for Strategic Communication, USA)
6 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Information Operations, Joint Publication 3-13, , 13 February 2006, pp. ix, xii
7 Dennis M. Murphy, Talking the Talk: Why Warfighters Don’t Understand Information Operations, (Center for Strategic Leadership, U.S. Army War College, May 2009)
9 Robert L. Perry, Principles of Strategic Communication for a New Global Commons, (US Naval War College Newport, RI, June 2008)