STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN 21ST CENTURY:
UNDERSTANDING NEW EVOLVING CONCEPT AND ITS
RELEVANCE FOR PAKISTAN

(Ms. Afifa Kiran) *

Abstract

In today’s contemporary conflicts, both of interstate and intra
state nature, there are often multiple threats from non state actors
working within a state. The nature of war in the new world order
has changed from direct to indirect, i.e. emergence of 4th and 5th
generation warfare, and a major shift in security paradigm from
traditional to nontraditional security. Media has come up as
another very powerful and vibrant player. In this backdrop, it can
be stated that there is a need to harness the potential of Pakistan
media. To that end, few years back, the concept of Strategic
Communication (SC) evolved in the West “to understand and
engage key audiences for the advancement of national interests,
policies, and objectives in conflict prone areas with the actions of
all instruments of national power. In Pakistan’s case, SC is more
than disseminating of information but the active solicitation of
stakeholders’ perspectives. This paper seeks to provide an
understanding of what SC is in the age of information warfare,
and see its relevance in Pakistan’s context.

Key Words: traditional, solicitation, strategic communication,
synchronized, psychology, sociology

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“To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

Sun Tzu, The Art of War.

Introduction

New paradigms of 21st century conflicts demand novel approaches from concerned governments to deal with multifarious instabilities within states, particularly involving non-state actors. Unlike the past, conflicts are now more information-based. Actors involved in conflicts have embraced modern communication technologies to influence minds of people more effectively than anything seen previously. Resultantly, states in present security scenarios are more vulnerable and are involved in multidimensional and transnational threats than ever before. In such security settings, states in general and armed forces in particular are bound to carry out novel and diverse tasks, such as post conflict reconstruction, capacity building of affected populace and civilian institutions, and security sector reform to further their interests in any particular way.

In today’s contemporary conflicts, both of interstate and intra-state nature, such as in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the threat is more difficult to define; in fact, there are often multiple threats from non state actors working within a state. The nature of war in the new world order has changed from direct to indirect, i.e. emergence of 4th and 5th generation warfare, and a major shift in security paradigm from traditional to nontraditional security. Another very powerful and vibrant player in the shape of media has come up and has direct bearing on all national and international issues. In this backdrop, it can be stated that there is a need to
harness the potential of Pakistan media which is very vocal however acts in limbo over critical security issues. Lethality of social media can be judged by the Tunisian and Libyan revolution. To that end, few years back, the concept of Strategic Communication (SC) evolved in the West “to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favourable for the advancement of national interests, policies, and objectives with coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized in conflict prone areas with the actions of all instruments of national power”. Although in our part of the region this is a relatively new term among the defence and civil policy makers. It has been coined to achieve desired ends/objectives particularly in post armed operations but the formulation of strategic communication within the very framework of national security strategy would help governments to mobilize people in support of major policy initiatives in post-armed operations scenario. For states, strategic communication serves as an instrument of statecraft to facilitate governments involved in counter insurgency operations (COIN) or armed conflicts, so as to influence perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of stakeholders, non-state groups, neutrals, competitors, and adversaries in support of national security policies. Presently, Department of Defense (DOD), US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), and other US government agencies are struggling with the concept of strategic communication. However, in 2001 Defence Science Board (DSB) USA Task Force on Strategic Communication published a report and suggested actionable recommendations for Strategic Communication in the 21st century. According to the report reviewed by Policy Coordinating Committee
of US in April 2006, concept of “strategic communication deals with the challenge of convincing others to think and act in ways compatible with their objectives”. As Sun Tzu once stated, “War is at heart the art of deception”, likewise, hard information operations, such as electronic warfare, computer network operations, and military deception all have their place in preparing for and conducting active warfare to gain advantages required to win victory. In such scenario, strategic communication helps to form perspective and increase interaction which gives eventual achievement of national interests.

This paper seeks to provide an understanding of what Strategic Communication (SC) is in the age of information warfare, and see its relevance in Pakistan’s context while keeping in view the complex volatile security situation of our part of the region.

**What is 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 Economy (DIME) to accomplish the national objective in post conflict/insurgency scenario.

According to the DSB USA report, 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 other influential networks; political, social, economic and religious motivations.

- **Advising** policymakers, diplomats, and military leaders on public opinion and 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.

As Newt Gingrich, student of strategic communication has written, “Strategic Communication in a real-time worldwide information system is a branch of the art of war comparable to logistics or intelligence”.6 It will require staffing, educating and practicing at about the same level of resources as intelligence or logistics to be successful.7 Public Affairs Operations USA explains it in these words, Western scholars claim that during times of major conflict, strategic communication has a crucial role. Some military experts argue that strategic communication, in irregular warfare, is
the campaign rather than an aspect of it. Colonel T.X. Hammes, a retired from Marine Corps, suggests that modern insurgencies have become a strategic communication campaign supported by military action. This is a paradigm shift from the traditionally accepted method of conducting operations, which employs public diplomacy and other related instruments in support of military operations. Strategic Communication, which is both message and action, provides the means to harness the elements of national power in an effective manner. The above-mentioned orchestra helps us to understand strategic communication as coordination of statecraft, Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy (Military), Information Operations and other activities, reinforced by political, economic and military actions, in a synchronized and coordinated manner.

**Evolution of Term SC**

Evolution of this term is linked with number of factors. Effective communication must build and maintain credibility and trust with friends and foes alike, through an emphasis on consistency, veracity and transparency both in words and deeds. Such credibility is essential to building trusted networks that counter ideological support for terrorism. The need for this concept emerged when it was felt that conventional separating 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. Specifically it was mentioned in 1957 by Dyer in his book 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*. Basing on the discussion carried out 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)
- 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”\(^\text{14}\) 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 qualifications are different from Information operations (IO) capabilities that consist of, military deception, computer network operations, electronic warfare, covert psychological operations and operational security. IO is a term to include Computer Network Operations (Computer Network Attack and Defense), Electronic Warfare, Operational Security, Military Deception, and PSYOP\(^\text{15}\).

In 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.\(^\text{16}\) In the other words, strategic communication focuses on the cognitive dimension of the information environment.\(^\text{17}\) Communication, which is both message and action, provides the means to harness the elements of national
power in an effective manner however, strategic communication processes and supporting capabilities must be included in all aspects of the federal government’s activities and synchronized vertically and horizontally.\textsuperscript{18}

**Strategic Communication Process**

Effective application of SC does not simply involve a source transmitting to an audience, but rather active engagement between parties. These engagement modes are derivative from the policy, strategic vision, campaign plan and operational design. Strategic Communication as a process is continuous.\textsuperscript{19} This involves research, planning, execution, monitoring and assessing the effects on targeted population and involves coordination at two ends:-

- **Horizontal coordination.** Among Government agencies

\textit{Model by Col Laura Berry, Lt Col Tadd Sholtis, Communication Planning From the Wing to the Air Staff, (USA Air force March 2009)}
Vertical coordination. (Up and down the chain of command).

This process will ensure the following:-

- Policy planning, while keeping in view the cultural, informational, and communication considerations.
- “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 with 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, SC process involves actors including army, Government communication agencies, local media, and Law enforcement agencies. This enhances targeted population support for major military operations, shapes the environment to prevent conflict through influencing the minds of neutrals, stake holders, locals, and to some extent miscreants, and during armed operation, SC will ensure favorable environment for the realization of national security interests of the state.

Role of SC in Post Armed Operations

Classic counterinsurgency (COIN) theorists agree, “real fight is for the support of the population, and that communication is essential for victory”. SC is comprised by everything, kinetic and non-kinetic, that is done on the battlefield and throughout the Area of Operation (AO) and Area of Interest (AI) to achieve an information effect. For a combat commander, the place to organize strategic communication at the operational level is the population. In order to separate the population from insurgents’ influence, “strategic communication should be made a priority by making it a line of operation on equal footing with security, governance, and
development within the counterinsurgency spectrum. This will ensure state authority with population support and enhance the effectiveness of information that is disseminated to the public”.

**Impending Threat Spectrum for Pakistan**

Pakistan’s threat perception in relation to the country’s security essentially relates to the interplay of external and internal factors, sharpened due to the country’s critical geopolitical location. Terrorism and proxy wars from external roots intermingle here with extremism, and sectarian manifestations from within, and thus, carry destabilization potential in the way of the nation’s progress. The interplay also provides fertile ground for organized crime in the form of smuggling, drug mafia, dacoits and kidnappers. This unfolds a threat to the very base of society and poses a great challenge to the writ of the state. The challenges facing Pakistan today are multidimensional and so is the need for equal preparedness and response. Various dimensions of the challenges ought to be viewed in relation to the following listing.

- Spill over of the Afghan Situation
- Proxy wars amidst unresolved issues with the eastern neighbor
- Internal threat

On the external front, Afghan factor is critical for the Country’s security because of its spill over affect. Afghanistan, more than any other neighbor, has a 2600 KMs long common border with Pakistan. A considerable population on either side of the border has common culture, ethnicity and language. They have hundreds of tribes along genealogical charter which they use as a basis of unity and solidarity as well as fission and conflict. Their common culture and values facilitate them to move freely across the border and any disastrous situation in one country affects the people of the other country. With the U.S invasion of Afghanistan, the remnants of Al-Qaeda and
Taliban took refuge in inaccessible and hostile terrain of Pakistan’s Western borders. They expanded their destructive activities to the urban areas of Pakistan and started targeting government installations and security forces. To tackle the menace, a significant number of Pakistani Armed Forces have been deployed to the border region. The second grave issue is drug trafficking. “Afghanistan produces 90% of the world’s opium supply, a third of which is transited through Pakistan. Opium is not the only illicit trade in the Pakistan and Afghanistan border regions, however, Afghanistan is also now the second-largest ‘cannabis resin’ producer in the world. There is also significant illicit trade in timber, antiques, and cigarettes in the border areas. The drug trade across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is not only weakening state control but also cementing linkages among drug traffickers throughout the larger region, Taliban, insurgents, and criminal groups. In turn, this nexus of drugs, crime, and insurgents threatens NATO supply routes and offers resistance to ongoing military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s tribal areas”.

Moreover, Pakistan’s relations with its eastern neighbor, India are embroiled with unresolved political issues (e.g Kashmir, Sir Creek and Water issues) and therefore remain a subject of trust deficit that runs counter to normalization. Blame game from both sides and history of proxy wars further adds fuel to the bitterness. Pakistan permanently keeps a significant number of troops to watch the border and avoid any misadventurism. Internal threat confronting Pakistan have assumed greater significance for the country’s institutions in view of its linkages with the external factors who may have limited-purpose alliances with Al-Qaeda and Taliban. The militancy is expressed in tools such as suicide bombings, target killings and civilian losses.

**Does Pakistan Need Strategic Communication in Existing Threat Gamut?**
International security environment has witnessed a paradigm shift from traditional threats to non-traditional threat spectrum. This is compelled by the emergence of new forces in the international political system which can be listed as quest to capture natural resources, economic integration, technological prowess, globalization, dissemination of sensitive information through rapidly growing media industry, and asymmetric warfare. These forces have driven international relations in a specific direction where strategic locations of Pakistan and Afghanistan in South Asia, Iran in the Middle East and Central Asian Republics and Russia and China have become the chess board of New Great Game for political and economic gains. With this paradigm shift of threat, the strategy of external factors against Pakistan can be summarized as to exploit Pakistan’s vulnerabilities on psychological, economic, social, cultural, and political planes and bleed it militarily through a proxy war, without direct engagement, a manifestation of the modern concept of hybrid war. It also aims to involve Pakistan into an arms race forcing a reactive strategy to further accentuate force imbalances and target people’s resolve so as to create conditions for social, political and ideological degradation. Moreover, through exterior maneuver and propaganda campaign, it aims to force sanctions and embargos from the donor countries and agencies to steer Pakistan towards diplomatic marginalization thus rendering it irrelevant to the regional equation, and force it to accept fait accompli and cut its stature, prestige, size and ability to exert influence in geo-economic calculus.

In the background of this strategy the threat spectrum of Pakistan ranges from insurgencies, ideological conflicts, economic espionage, religious extremism, sabotage and subversion, cultural vulnerabilities, gangs and turf wars, criminal enterprises, terrorism, ethnic conflicts, drug wars and information wars. There is a need for
Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Operations (SSTR) in which the principle role of the military forces is to set security conditions for performance by civil authorities. The proportion of offensive, defensive and stability operations varies through various stages to enable civil authorities to function effectively to counter irregular and unconventional warfare and effect based operations. In reaction to specific security scenario, in last few years, Pakistan has developed comprehensive counter terrorism policies 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 government 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 government besides other social-economic reasons. For Pakistan, SC can be used to mobilize masses in support of major policy initiatives and to support objectives before, during, and after a conflict. “Forces fighting on the front-line in the tribal regions are now being trained according to requirements of sub-conventional warfare”. Preparation of the new doctrine started a year ago and has been adopted successfully by Pakistan Army. The Army is now prepared for all forms of threats in current times. Sub-conventional threat is a reality and is a part of the threat matrix faced by our country. Critical thinking is a necessary attribute in today’s soldier in such a resource constrained environment. But critical thinking alone can never be sufficient for him to exercise his duties to deal with today’s threats. A comprehensive training and knowledge of fighting grounds to deal with non state actors enables him to win the national support at an acceptable cost. New British Army unit 'Brigade 77' is authorized to
use Facebook and Twitter in psychological warfare. They will specialize in "non-lethal" forms of psychological warfare, using social media including Facebook and Twitter to "fight in the information age". In future, it would be harder to know who or what we are dealing with unless we learn to fight war on planed strategic communication.

**Recommended Strategic Communication Plan for Pakistan**

Strategic communication is a vital tool in the 21st century information environment. One can say that it is expansion of IO. As Pakistan faces many violent situations arising in its fight against terrorism and uses force to curb the menace. In such unpredictable environment, it is necessary to maintain popular support and insurgent-population isolation. At present, communication dominance is a prerequisite for accomplishment in asymmetric warfare. It is time to admit that Pakistan has been unsuccessful in the SC drive to gain support of our own people, to fade the force of our enemies, and get the support of international community. In the current battle of wills, strategic communication is the center of gravity. This conflict is not to be won through economic, diplomatic, and military means. SC is a prerequisite for any successful counterinsurgency. Therefore, it should be the top priority of the Pakistan 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 College USA in 2008;
• **Leadership-driven**: Leaders must decisively engage and drive SC processes

• **Credible**: Perception of truthfulness and respect between all parties

• **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 or 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.\(^{37}\)

**Conclusion**

Strategic communication is not the silver bullet, but it does present the possibility of a more tightly focused informational contribution to the strength of the other instruments of national power to achieve aims of national strategies.\(^{38}\) 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. There is need to understand that SC is increasingly important in asymmetrical fighting, because SC focuses on selected peoples beyond the local population. Consequently, it is decisive
across the range of military operations. 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 particularly in post operation scenario.

**End Notes**

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