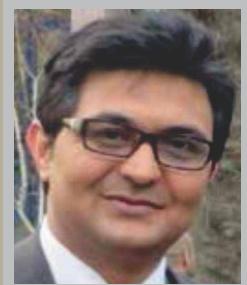




STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

ABSTRACT



Dr M Sheharyar Khan

The post-modern conflicts have become complex, unconventional and asymmetric. The belligerents are increasingly supplementing their military strategies with propaganda. Sometimes, they spend more on information warfare, than actual combat. In such a complex media environment, which has been facilitated by the advent of modern internet-based communication technology, states have no choice but to heavily invest in their Strategic Communication (SC) strategy. This paper highlights the need for supplementing military strategy with a strategic communications strategy. It is argued that conflicts cannot be resolved with brute force alone. From conflict to post-conflict resolution, strategic communications play a pivotal role. The article also suggests some contours of the SC model for the government.

Keywords: Strategic Communication, Information Environment, Conflict Resolution, Peace building, VNSAs, Propaganda, New Media and Perception Management.



"The projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects, using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest" Neville Bolt

Different definitions provide a different understanding of SC yet there are several common elements: coordinated and coherent use of all means of communication to influence targeted audiences in pursuit of political and national interests

Introduction

In armed conflict, every belligerent tries to influence the opinion-forming process in his favour. The purpose of influencing public perception is to mobilize the resources of society for his own benefit, persuade people his fight is the fight of good versus evil, convince allies that it's in their best interest to support the belligerent. To convince the enemy that a continuous fight is futile and lure neutrals to take his side. Influencing public opinion was called "propaganda," in the past and it had no negative or pejorative connotation. But the term is no more positive and is equated with an endless stream of lies. But propaganda is still relevant and is used by a different state, sub-state and non-state actors during war and peacetime. But they do not use the same term. The common term of the day is Strategic Communications (SC) at the strategic level. Information Operations (IOs) are used at the tactical and operational level. In other words, the term propaganda is used by protagonists for the enemy while SC and IOs are used for their own side.

Strategic Communications is thus employed by the states to achieve their well defined national interests. However, there is no unified definition or understanding of term SC even though it is being practised by different governments. On the academic front, Christopher Paul defines SC as 'coordinated actions, messages, images and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives'.¹ According to James Farwell, SC includes 'the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives'.²

Neville Bolt defines SC as 'the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects, using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest'.³ On the institutional front, there are numerous definitions of SC by different institutions. For instance, the US government (USG) defines SC as: The focused USG efforts to understand and engage key audiences to

create, strengthen and preserve conditions for the advancement of USG interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.⁴

The UK Ministry of Defence defines SC as efforts to advance 'national interests by using defence as a means of communication to influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of audiences'⁵ and NATO defines SC as 'the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities and in order to advance NATO's aims'.⁶

All these definitions provide a different understanding of SC yet there are several common elements: coordinated and coherent use of all means of communication (words, images and actions) to influence targeted audiences in pursuit of political and national interests. Following this understanding, this article adopts the definition offered by the StratCom Terminology Project. According to the StratCom Terminology Project, SC represents 'a holistic approach to communication, based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.⁷





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The contested environments have caused civil conflicts, terrorism and insurgencies. These conflicts are mostly intra-state but some are inter-state as well. Countries are increasingly applying SC to resolve and manage conflicts. Hard power alone cannot completely stamp out conflicts. Most of the conflicts have deep roots and are often political in nature. As such, military strategy alone does not solve the problem permanently. That is why countries have now adopted sophisticated SC strategies in combination of the military strategy.

The main argument of this article is that SC can be an instrumental tool in conflict resolution and should be made part of military strategy.

Role of SC in Conflict Resolution

Armed conflicts are not only violent but also a theatre for action. The belligerents in the armed conflicts, especially the non-state actors, aim to covet support of domestic as well as international audience. They try their best to shape the information environment to their advantage. Combat action becomes a media spectacle and aims to get across the message and get approval. Violent Non-state Actors (VNSA) understands it better than the general society.⁸

VNSAs combines all their combat, political and actions with SC operations to the extent that they could not be distinguished from each other. The goal is to create societal Stockholm syndrome for the society to support VNSAs activities.⁹

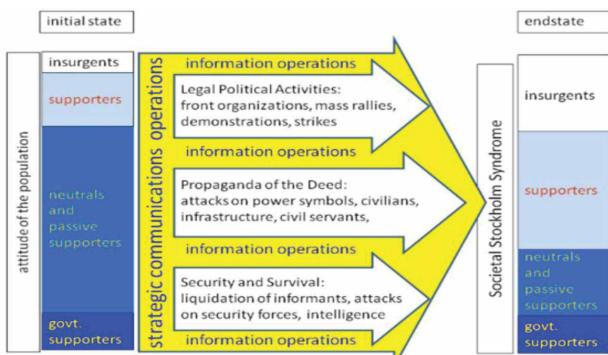


Diagram 1: The goal of non-state belligerent: generate societal Stockholm syndrome to gain increased popular support, and force society to bend to his will.¹⁰

For the conflict to be resolved on permanent bases, the root causes should be addressed and people should be made partners in solving the conflicts. This is not achievable either through military strategy or political strategy alone if not in sync with SC strategy

The non-state actors often have so-called 'noble goals' and attractive slogans like liberty, just distribution of wealth and self-determination, while at the same time can unleash unspeakable atrocities to achieve these goals. They manipulate the information environment to influence public opinion and gain its sympathy. The VNSAs create a narrative of victimhood by exaggerating the real or imagined grievances; highlighting discrimination and suffering and creating hope of deliverance and better future. Such a narrative can be easily created since injustice and grievances whether political or economic, exist almost in every country, even in the most developed and democratic countries.

However, the actions of law enforcement agencies are often subject to suspicion and doubt. Statements of the political and security officials are questioned and debated. In some cases, the doubt may have some genuine ground to it. In some instances, security personnel commit breaches of the law. Since a state's legitimacy rests on the guarantees of safety and security of its citizens, unlawful behaviour of its institution can threaten this legitimacy. At the same time, such breaches of the law can be publicized within seconds on social media and other media outlets, thanks to the advancement in digital technology. This can damage the cause of the governments hugely. That is why the state institutions must not only be law-abiding but also be seen and accepted as such.

This changing information environment leaves the state with no choice but to invest heavily in SC. The state must win the hearts and minds of the people to not only counter the propaganda of VNSAs, but also legitimize its own actions. The resolution of the conflicts will not be achieved only by the use of hard power and subduing the enemy. For the conflict to be resolved on permanent bases, the root causes should be addressed and people should be made partners in solving the conflicts. This is not achievable either through military strategy or political strategy alone if not in sync with SC strategy.

To achieve these goals, the SC strategy must identify the best media to address the target audiences.



SC accompanies the life cycle of the conflict: from the start when tensions rise, through the conflict period and finally through a ceasefire and ultimate stable situation followed by resolution of the conflict on permanent bases

Such an environment should be created that belligerents are isolated from the mainstream media, while domestic and other international audiences and stakeholders evaluate the conflict in line with the government narrative. As such, the government should be the primary and reliable source of information. A strategy should be adopted to deal with the sources of false information which help the insurgents; legislative action can be used to address this issue.

Contours of SC Model

The recent military conflicts are mostly unconventional in nature and as such, it cannot be approached from conventional prism. It is now more important than the past to know the audience, the knowledge of the public and their sociological context in order to influence their perception and gain their trust and sympathy.¹¹ The decision of the government to take military actions should not only be legal but they should be viewed as legitimate throughout the implementation process. In the modern era, the legality of the decisions is considered a continuous process. It is not just lawful per se. The actions should be viewed by those who are affected, as legitimate. To achieve this, there would be a need to manage the perception of the public and persuade them to accept the decision and action.

SC accompanies the life cycle of the conflict: from the start when tensions rise, through the conflict period and finally through a cease-fire and ultimate stable situation followed by resolution of the conflict on permanent bases. There would be times when erosion is seen in the public support for the actions of the government during and after the conflict. The erosion of the support depends upon the longevity of the conflict. If conflicts protract, people can lose trust in government efforts. The government needs to manage public expectations, its missions and the objectives of the actions. These objectives must be specific and measurable. The government should not create false expectations.

An indispensable condition of the success of SC is the unity of messages: the political leadership, the

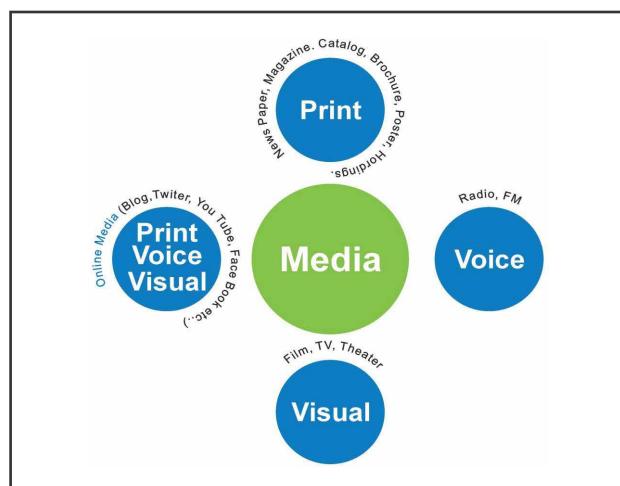
New technology as a medium, will enable the government to undertake information operations in the real-time across multiple platforms like traditional news media and new media platforms such as Internet publications as well as social media networks

security forces, the ministries must all follow one narrative both in the statements of their employees and in their actions. This could be achieved through integration and central supervision of all communications activities. But it should be kept in mind that not everyone should repeat like a parrot, the same text word for word. The message should be unified not the words per se. Care should be taken in identifying the target audience according to the situation. Appropriate media should be identified to convey the tailor made message.

New technology as a medium, will enable the government to undertake information operations in real-time across multiple platforms like traditional news media (television or radio) and new media platforms such as Internet publications as well as social media networks.

The channels of communication can take the following form:

- Between individuals in the conflict.
- Within a group where conflict exists.
- Within groups or communities in conflict.
- Between communities and organizations such as multi-laterals, government and NGO's where cooperation and coordination are issues.





New technologies have impacted a great change in the collection of information and to decide who can participate in the communication process

The communication between all these stakeholders can be achieved through different media, both traditional and the new media. These are the channels where information interventions are done to introduce positive framing of the government agenda and narrative. The government can decide on which platform to use for target audiences from the given stakeholders. This approach provides for multiple pathways, functions and relationship focusing on tools through which people can communicate.

Traditional methods, like community meetings, radio, television, and newspapers, have long been informing the communities and organizations on the ground. With the addition of new communication tools like cellular phones, SMS, WhatsApp, social media and other interactive and smart apps, individuals, communities and organizations can now complement these traditional forms of media. These new tools of communication facilitate more information gathering and interactions between users.

In their application to conflict resolution and peace-building, these new tools of communication can contribute to greater knowledge and understanding about changing conditions on the ground. They help in understanding the needs of communities that are enduring or have endured violence and can even increase contact and understanding between opposing groups. New technologies have impacted a great change in the collection of information and to decide who can participate in the communication process.

To employ the new tools of information sharing, the following distinctions have to be made to see how the information is conveyed:-

- One to Many – broadcast - radio, TV, web mobile applications and short message service (SMS) broadcast.
- One to One - voice, mobile and SMS.
- Many to Many - social networks including online or mobile internet, mapping and crowdsourcing.

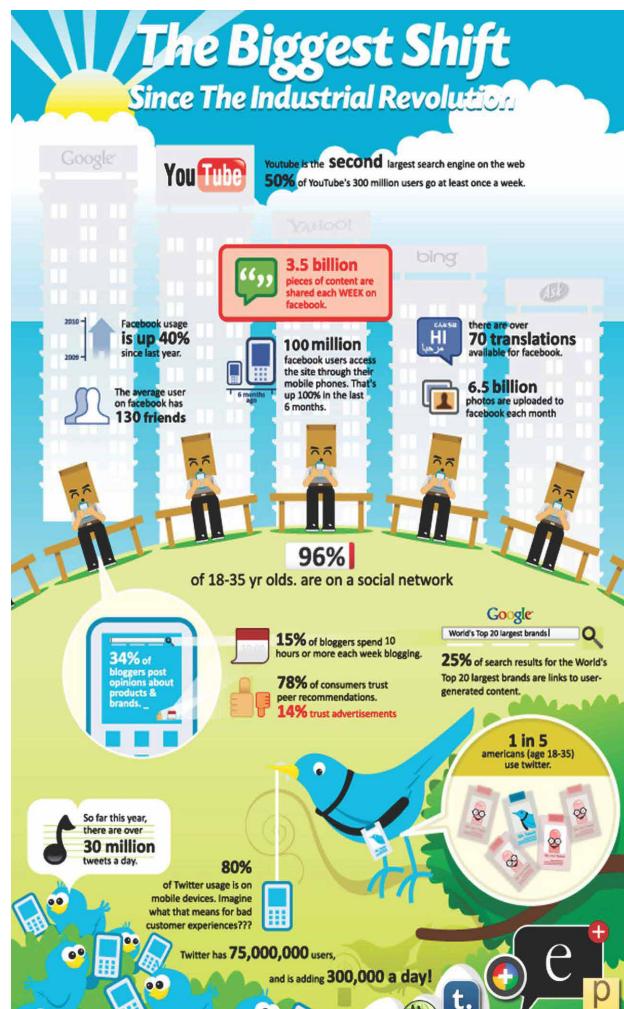
This distinction is important since it can help the government to decide what particular actors are

The governments would need to identify the audiences, decide on which is the best media to use and frame the message in such a way so as to promote its narrative on the conflict

more active in one sphere than other, thus different tools would be used in different identified spheres.

Conclusion

Strategic Communication is the use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences in order to achieve strategic interests of the state. The term has replaced propaganda which had developed a negative connotation. The new information environment and the asymmetry and unconventional nature of modern





conflicts have necessitated the adoption SC strategy to the military strategy. SC is devised at the strategic level while Information Operations (IOs) are applied at the tactical and operational level. SC and IOs are applied throughout the cycle of conflict. SC becomes more important to resolve conflicts in the long term and permanent bases by controlling the information environment, alongside the kinetic operations. The post-operation environment may not necessarily resolve the conflict. As such, SC strategy should look to change the perceptions of the stakeholders. Not only to legitimize actions but also to end the conflicts by managing the information environment. The governments would need to identify the audiences, decide on which is the best media to use and frame the message in such a way so as to promote its narrative on the conflict. The introduction of new media technologies has created opportunities to reach all kinds of audiences and engage with them. Both traditional and new media could be used for the purpose of SC. Most importantly, whatever channel is used, the message should be unified on part of the government.

Dr. M. Sheharyar Khan is a well acknowledged researcher on FATA, KPK and Afghanistan.

NOTES

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