

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND THE MILITARY

Lt Col Akshat Upadhyay

Abstract

In contemporary warfare, Strategic Communication (SC) serves as a critical force multiplier, shaping perceptions and influencing behaviours across domestic and international audiences. This article explores its role in Information Warfare (IW), examining how SC can enhance military operations and shape the information environment. The paper emphasises the importance of managing the information effects of kinetic actions, highlighting the necessity of countering adversary narratives and controlling perceptions. Additionally, the analysis delves into the use of influence machines and their potential to undermine a nation's resolve. To adapt to this evolving landscape, the paper proposes a comprehensive approach for militaries, suggesting the need to leverage cutting-edge technology, prioritise authenticity, credibility and transparency, and deepen understanding of target audiences. Crucially, the author advocates empowering SC institutions to ensure coordinated and effective messaging. This approach underscores the importance of SC in achieving national security objectives and maintaining an advantage in the cognitive domain.

INTRODUCTION

Nuclear deterrence relies on communicating capability and credibility. In nuclear deterrence literature, this framework is known as the three Cs.¹ It denotes a nation's strength and its willingness to use the weapon.

However, without clear communication, even the most powerful weapons may not deter. During the Cold War, the US and Soviet Union struggled with this, relying on assumptions and strategic culture to interpret each other's actions.² To deter an enemy without the benefit of direct dialogue, Thomas Schelling proposed the 'Schelling point,' a game-theoretic solution where people converge on a predictable outcome based on shared expectations and understanding.³ The high point of this way of communication was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 where actions and counter-actions signalled intent, both to escalate and later, de-escalate.⁴ The advent of modern communication technologies, especially with the Silicon revolution of the 1960s led to more effective ways of getting one's message across. The end of the Cold War, relative democratisation of these technologies and proliferation of security threats led to militaries attempting to utilise information in a manner that furthered their aims - in conventional and sub-conventional operations. The current milieu, that features a combination of great power competition (GPC), generative artificial intelligence (AI), social media platforms and lone wolf actors within the same operational continuum requires militaries to strategically communicate messages to a wide and diffused swathe of audience including friends, foe and neutrals. Not only this, communication also precedes, works in tandem and succeeds kinetic operations, and at times, may preclude kinetic operations in the achievement of a political goal.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

There are numerous terms used across organisations that are understood to be interchangeable and sometime synonymous to each other. These are Strategic Communication (SC), Information Operations (IO) and Information Warfare (IW). Not only this, there are multiple sub-categories within these terms too. It is therefore important that a certain taxonomy be established for clarity. While there are differing views on what exactly SC is, for the purpose of this paper, it is defined as "orchestrated use of communication - encompassing words, actions, imagery and symbols - to inform and influence key audiences in ways that advance national interests and objectives."⁵ Here, inform and influence are two major

aspects of SC and there are different standard operating procedures (SOPs) and agencies to deal with them. However, as in most countries including India, there is no overarching authority to orchestrate the actions of these agencies in pursuit of common national objectives. Therefore, the roles of these agencies overlap resulting sometimes in 'information fratricide' where communication actions by one agency works at cross-purposes to the others.

INFORMATION AS A WEAPON: HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

While SC is an umbrella term and has been coined as recently as 2002⁶, information operations, or the use of information to influence adversaries, has been in effect since ages. The Athenians used disinformation during a campaign against Xerxes to dissuade the Persians from working with certain Greek allies at Salamis. They achieved this by sending messages that created distrust in the loyalty of their allies.⁷ Operation Fortitude was a military deception operation that tricked Germany into believing that the Allied invasion of Europe would occur in either the Pas de Calais or Norway, instead of Normandy. This was achieved by the creation of a Ghost Army or officially, the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops.⁸ Using inflatable tanks, sound trucks, fake radio transmissions and scripts, an environment was created which capitalised on the Germans' own appreciation of where the Allies were likely to land in France. During the 1999 Kosovo conflict, the US deployed psychological operations (PSYOPS) units as part of Operation Noble Anvil to combat Serbian propaganda about the conflict. These units distributed leaflets, broadcast radio and occupied television spots to inform the Serbs about atrocities committed by their government, which was being led by Slobodan Milosevic.⁹ These messages countered the narratives being spread by the Serbian government by sharing factual information about the war, including the "campaign of mass murder, systematic rape, and forced evacuation."¹⁰

INFORM AND INFLUENCE

One of the most comprehensive lexicon of SC has been devised the US military. Before defining the terms used by them and attempting a

degree of interlinking, it is important that the difference between 'inform' and 'influence' is clearly enunciated. For sake of clarity, each SC aspect will be dissected based on the focus, goal, methods and challenges framework. Inform refers to the act of conveying factual information to an audience without the explicit intent to shape their opinions or behaviours. The focus of inform is to provide objective information to audiences aimed at neutral reporting and transparency. This achieves the goal of increasing awareness and understanding of events, policies or perspectives. The methods used for informing are press releases, media engagements, official statements, fact sheets and reports. The challenges, and this issue will become clearer with a case study, of using this aspect of SC are that information, even when presented neutrally, inevitably shapes perceptions and can influence opinions and, the line between informing and influencing blurs when reporting on events with pre-determined strategic objectives.

Influence, on the other hand, represents a more deliberate effort to shape the attitudes, opinions and behaviours of target audiences to achieve specific objectives. Unlike informing, influencing acknowledges an intentionality that goes beyond mere information dissemination. The focus of influence is to shape the attitudes, opinions and behaviours of target audiences to align with desired objectives. The goal is to generate support, change perceptions or encourage specific actions. The methods used here are a little more abstract as compared to the inform aspect. These are persuasive communication, narrative crafting and framing, psychological techniques and leveraging social influence principles. The challenges include maintaining credibility and ethical considerations, especially when targeting foreign audiences and distinguishing between the information effects of kinetic operations and solely communication actions.

HIERARCHICAL ORDERING OF SC CONCEPTS

Though there is no strict hierarchical ordering of the various terms that comprise SC, this author through a perusal of multiple primary and secondary documents related to SC, IO and IW, has come out with

a relational tree. A majority of this ordering is influenced by the US military since they have devised the most comprehensive definitions and activities under SC. In a number of countries, some activities are folded under a single agency while in others they do not exist. At the top is SC, which represents the totality of a government's words and deeds to advance its interests. The next tier comprises IO and IW. While the former is a coordinated process within the DoD that aligns with and supports strategic communication goals, the latter can be viewed as a broader concept, encompassing both offensive and defensive use of information to achieve objectives during crisis or conflict. Activities under IO are Military Information Support Operations (MISO)¹¹, Military Deception (MILDEC)¹² and Operational Security (OPSEC).¹³ These form the third layer. MISO, also referred to as PSYOPS, focuses on influencing foreign audiences' perceptions and behaviours through planned communication and shapes the information environment. MILDEC involves deliberately misleading adversaries through feints, disinformation and other tactics to shape their perceptions and actions. OPSEC aims to protect sensitive information from enemy exploitation, ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of IO and other operations. Cyber Warfare (CW) and Electronic Warfare (EW) form part of both IO and IW and refer respectively to manipulating information systems and the electromagnetic (EM) spectrum and form part of the fourth layer, along with Public Affairs (PA). PA is centered around providing information to various audiences, both domestic and international, about the goals, policies and activities of the government and this term is very US specific. This includes disseminating factual information about military operations, responding to press inquiries, and communicating about humanitarian efforts.¹⁴ There is, however, still significant contestation in placing PA directly under SC or under IO. This represents the ongoing debate regarding the level of integration between PA and IO, with some arguing for closer coordination and others emphasising separation to maintain PA's credibility. At the fifth and last layer are computer network operations (CNO) which are a subset of CW. For the sake of this article, only the broader inform and influence parts will be covered.

CASE STUDY: US MARINE AMPHIBIOUS LANDINGS DURING GULF WAR I: BLURRING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN INFORM AND INFLUENCE

It is generally assumed that inform and influence aspects of SC are separate from each other, with the former falling under the ambit of public information or public affairs, and the latter in the realm of psychological operations or propaganda. However, recent case studies show that this may not entirely be true. In the process, the delicate boundary between these two components is often breached. During the First Gulf War, as part of the 'Two Corps' concept devised by General Norman Schwarzkopf, a 'Left Hook' comprising three armoured divisions, a mechanised infantry division and an armoured cavalry regiment was to lead the main assault to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi control. However, the success of the assault hinged on the willingness of the Iraqis to believe that the main assault was coming either from the south of the Kuwaiti border and/ or from the 5th Marine Expeditionary Battalion (MEB) afloat in the Persian Gulf, to the east.¹⁵ The US Army's Public Affairs Department's stated aim, at least one of them, is "counter[...] misinformation and disinformation".¹⁶ However, Public Affairs officers were involved in briefing members of the press, issuing press releases and facilitating the coverage of the Marines' preparation for the assault, in a classic case of disinformation despite their mandate being the exact opposite. The overall effect was the tying up of Iraqi troops to cater for this 'ghost' Army and the Left Hook decimated the remaining Iraqi force. This is a classic case of the inform and influence elements combining together to fulfil a politico-military objective, but does raise questions regarding the future credibility of such public-facing organisations.

RELATION BETWEEN SC AND THE MILITARY: A BROAD ARGUMENT

Contemporary warfare has evolved in its character as well as nature. In addition to the three traditional domains of land, maritime and air, new domains such as cyber, space, information, EM spectrum and cognitive have been created and are being contested. The modern battlefield has expanded into a 'battlespace' while the cognitive effects of war are

being directly felt, instead of being mediated through kinetic actions. SC therefore serves as a critical force multiplier for the military, capable of amplifying the effectiveness of traditional military operations while also providing distinct advantages in the increasingly important realms of information warfare and shaping of the international environment.

It is difficult for militaries to segregate inform and influence operations from one another since the intention is to impact and affect the minds of relevant audiences. These may range from the domestic, international and adversary. However, SC as a whole is meant to achieve national objectives of a particular country and inform and influence are two of the major ways to achieve the same. The words themselves evoke subjective judgments with the former appearing to be more positive than the latter, but it needs to be clarified that influence is not propaganda or deception. These latter two form part of military operations, though are generally used in the shorter term, when the objective is to sow discord among enemy ranks or disrupt their decision-making processes. Influence is a far more nuanced approach that seeks to build positive long term relationships that may be leveraged in future.

SC can be used by militaries in four effective ways. These are:

- **Countering Propaganda of the Adversary.** Militaries must be equipped to identify and counter adversary propaganda and disinformation campaigns that seek to undermine their operations, sow discord among allies and erode public support. SC for this may take the form of carefully crafted factual narratives and press releases, among other actions. Often, in this type of SC, the timing rather than the content of the counter is more important. Any propaganda of the adversary takes advantage of pre-existing faultlines (social, economic, political, cultural, religious or others) and identifies a trigger event or catalyst to disseminate divisive propaganda. It is extremely essential that this propaganda is identified and immediately countered. Rather than waiting to craft a wholesome fault-proof counter, the aim should be to get the counter-narrative out at the earliest, with a promise to deliver

supplementary proofs or facts in a later time frame. This helps fill the 'information void' which needs to be filled by own military or agency rather than the adversary.

- **Shaping the Operational Environment.** For militaries operating on their own soil, especially in counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism (CI/CT) areas, winning 'hearts and minds' becomes the primary objective - both in fulfilment of the larger political goal and at the tactical level by facilitating kinetic operations. An effective SC must, at all times, remember the primacy of the national aim. This will help in centering narratives and actions.
- **Enhancing Morale and Cohesion.** Internally, SC can play a vital role in enhancing morale and cohesion within the ranks, communicating strategic objectives clearly and ensuring that personnel of the Armed Forces understand and support the mission. With the proliferation or the infiltration of social media platforms and their 'surveillance capitalism'¹⁷ models, the dangers of internal vitiation remain high. An effective SC can preclude this.
- **Establishing and Maintaining Deterrence.** SC is a potent tool for advancing national interests, deterring adversaries and shaping the international environment in a manner favourable to national security objectives. For advancing national interests, SC helps in shaping perceptions and narratives, building partnerships and countering adversarial propaganda. On the other hand, deterring adversaries includes communicating red lines and costs of aggression, exposing and exploiting vulnerabilities of adversaries and maintaining information superiority.

SC is generally understood as advancing military objectives, pre-, during and post-operations. However, an under-appreciated aspect of SC is the information effects of kinetic actions which may intervene or interfere in the conduct of SC.

INFORMATION EFFECTS OF KINETIC ACTIONS

Kinetic actions, by their very nature, carry significant information effects. In fact, one of the main objectives of warfare is targeting the Cognitive

Centres of the Adversary (CCA), which can be understood as a subset of the conventional notion of Centre of Gravity (CoG). CCA focuses on the mental and psychological aspects of an adversary's power where SC can be used for targeting the enemy's beliefs, perceptions and decision-making processes through kinetic actions. "A bullet still sends a message"¹⁸ means that the conduct of military operations, choice of targets and even the treatment of civilians send powerful messages to both target audiences and the broader international community. The case of Hamas atrocities on 07 October 2023 and their impact on the broader psyche of Israel and the international community is a classic example.¹⁹ Militaries must, therefore, actively manage the information effects of their kinetic operations, anticipating potential misperceptions, countering adversary narratives and ensuring their actions align with their strategic messaging. As a result, it is necessary to include SC and information operations personnel during planning for operations.

INFLUENCE MACHINES

Recent conflicts have highlighted the tactical advantage bestowed on militaries using niche and emerging technologies. Major advances in AI have resulted in a convergence of data-dominant technologies and IO. By definition, an 'Influence Machine' is a system capable of shaping target audiences' perceptions through rapid and effective mimicry of human empathy, surpassing the speed and scale of traditional influence methods.²⁰ It has three key capabilities: algorithmic content generation, personalised targeting and firehose dissemination. The last term implies using automated systems and bot networks to spread propaganda and disinformation rapidly and widely across multiple online platforms, overwhelming audiences with a constant stream of biased information. One analyst calls the use of influence machines in warfare as a "strategic defeat mechanism"²¹ since they can undermine a nation's will to fight and erode public support for government policies, effectively achieving victory without resorting to traditional military force. In a manner of do it yourself (DIY) warfare²², influence machines can be exploited by non-state actors and individuals to create oversized adverse effects on states. These have the potential to bypass militaries and directly

target the CCA, making the task of SC more challenging. Traditional approaches may not be suited to tackle this threat, especially since they exploit the inherent openness and reliance on public opinion that characterise democratic systems. In fact, the use of influence machines is one of the best examples that demonstrates the changing and evolving nature of warfare, where information dominance and the ability to shape narratives have become crucial determinants of success, with a capacity to surpass traditional military might.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND THE FUTURE OF TRUTH

In the age of disinformation, deepfakes and AI-generated content, the very nature of truth is under siege. Plato's concept of the "noble lie"²³ raises the unsettling possibility that deception, even with benevolent intentions, could be wielded in SC. This notion is further complicated by Marshall McLuhan's idea that "the medium is the message,"²⁴ suggesting that the technology used to convey information shapes our perception of truth. Richard Rorty's work, which challenges the idea of objective truth and emphasises the social construction of knowledge, further complicates the matter, suggesting that truth is not something to be discovered but rather something that is created through dialogue and consensus,²⁵ while Neil Postman's insights warn of the potential for technology to blur the lines between truth and falsehood.²⁶ These combined perspectives paint a stark reality that the military faces unprecedented challenges in discerning and communicating truth. In this environment, SC must prioritise authenticity and transparency, while constantly adapting to the evolving information landscape. Failure to do so risks undermining the credibility of the military and jeopardising its ability to achieve its strategic objectives.

LIMITS OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Introduction of new actors and methods powered by niche technologies have also exposed weaknesses in the way SC has been used in the recent past. One of the biggest issues of SC is that of attribution and credibility, especially with operations in the cyber or special forces domain. No SC campaign can directly attribute these efforts to the

state carrying out these operations, however, the same also needs to be conveyed to the adversary in certain terms. Additionally, this also creates a 'firewall' effect - where foreign audiences start questioning the veracity of SC themes and narratives if they feel that the government is unwilling to share details of certain operations to its own citizens. The second is the crafting of compelling and powerful narratives. Militaries are notoriously incapable in this task since this requires specific skillsets not considered part of a conventional military tasking. The third and the most important issue is that SC is a probabilistic undertaking. There is never any guarantee that a particular SC will succeed or fail, and there are no metrics to measure its effectiveness. There are tools which can resort to engagements and sentiment analysis, but these are all manifestations of a larger campaign or may be organically generated. The success of SC is in the achievement of a stated aim or goal and one always wonders what the contribution of SC at the end was.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the challenges described above, following recommendations are suggested:

- **Adoption of Technology.** Just as non-state actors, private companies and individuals are using SC for their aims and objectives, militaries must also do the same. There is a need for continuous research and development (R&D) in AI - either in-house or as part of a collaboration with academia and/or industry. Influence machines need to be defeated by influence machines of our own, while technology needs to be leveraged for crafting and disseminating our own narratives.
- **Prioritise Authenticity, Credibility and Transparency.** Focusing on accurate and verifiable information is essential to build credibility and trust with target audiences. Here SC campaigns by militaries must not only focus on projecting strengths but also acknowledging untoward incidents and that too promptly. Again, the issue of 'information void' is paramount

and the actor filling it first has a leg up in the 24–48 hour information cycle. A military's SC must therefore cater for both positive and negative events and their fallouts.

- **Deepening Understanding of Target Audience.** An effective SC requires understanding of not only domestic but foreign audiences in detail. This requires investments in cultural intelligence and leveraging tools for target audience analysis.
- **Empowering SC and Enhancing Coordination.** SC institutions within the military need to be strengthened and their status elevated to that paralleling military operations and intelligence. Domain expertise should be cultivated in-house as quickly as possible and at times, external agencies should also be roped in. Breaking down silos between different government agencies involved in SC is crucial to ensure a coordinated and unified approach.

CONCLUSION

The evolving nature and character of warfare necessitates that militaries view strategic communication as a core competency with a recognition that every military action, interaction and information contributes to narratives that shape perceptions and influence behaviours. This requires a shift from compartmentalisation of SC to integrating it into all levels of military planning and execution, ensuring every soldier understands their role in shaping the narrative. Militaries must establish a unified command structure for SC, ensuring coherent messaging across all channels, both domestically and internationally, to build and maintain credibility in a complex information environment. Adapting to the dynamic and contested nature of the information age requires agility and sophisticated strategies to counter misinformation and maintain a competitive edge in the cognitive domain, all while upholding ethical considerations of transparency, accountability and respect for truth.



Lt Col Akshat Upadhyay is currently serving with HQ IDS. He has a Bachelors in Electronics and Telecommunication, Masters in History as well as Political Science and an MPhil in Defence and Strategic Studies. He has authored numerous peer-reviewed papers as well as op-eds and articles in prestigious national and international publications on the issues of home-grown radicalisation, lone wolf terrorism, social media mobilisation, IW and emerging and niche technologies. His first book on India's Coercive Diplomacy against Pakistan (KW Publishers) has been well received and his second book on Absorption of Disruptive Technologies in the Indian Armed Forces is being published. He was also a Research Fellow At MP-IDSA where he wrote extensively on disruptive technologies, non-contact warfare and semiconductors.

NOTES

- ¹ Matthew P Anderson, "NATO Nuclear Deterrence: The Warsaw Summit and Beyond," *Connections* QJ 15, no 4 (2016): 5-30.
- ² Jack L Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1977), <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R2154.pdf>.
- ³ Elaine Scarry, "The Extortionist's Doctrine," *Boston Review*, 26 September 24. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-extortionists-doctrine>.
- ⁴ Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Hoboken: Pearson PTR, 1999), 34-40.
- ⁵ Author's own definition.
- ⁶ James P Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 10.
- ⁷ Garth S Jowett and Victoria O'Donell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Washington DC: Sage Publications, 2011), 40-56.
- ⁸ Taylor Downing, "D-Day deception Operation Fortitude: The World War Two army that didn't exist," BBC, 01 June 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240531-d-day-deception-operation-fortitude-the-world-war-two-army-that-didnt-exist>.
- ⁹ Robin Brown, "Information Operations, Public Diplomacy & Spin: The United States & the Politics of Perception Management," *Journal of Information Warfare*, Vol 1, no 3 (2002): 40-50.
- ¹⁰ Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*, 16.

¹¹ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Staff, Military Information Support Operations*, Joint Publication 3-13.2, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading_Room/Joint_Staff/Military_Information_Support_Operations.pdf.

¹² US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Staff, Military Deception*, Joint Publication 3-13.4, https://jfsc.ndu.edu/Portals/72/Documents/JC2IOS/Additional_Reading/1C3-JP_3-13-4_MILDEC.pdf

¹³ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Staff, Joint Doctrine for Operations Security*, Joint Publication 3-54, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA357528.pdf>.

¹⁴ US Army, *Army Public Affairs, Army Public Affairs: Telling the Army Story*, <https://www.army.mil/publicaffairs>.

¹⁵ Donald P Wright, “Deceiving Iraq in Operation Desert Storm,” in *Weaving the Tangled Web: Military Deception in Large Scale Combat Operations* ed Christopher Rein, (Fort Leavenworth: Army University Press, 2018), 215-230.

¹⁶ US Army, *Army Public Affairs, Army Public Affairs: Telling the Army Story*, <https://www.army.mil/publicaffairs>.

¹⁷ Sam DiBella, “Book Review: *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* by Shoshana Zuboff,” review of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, by Shoshana Zuboff, *London School of Economics Blog*, November 4, 2019.

¹⁸ Robert Westport, “A bullet still sends a message...,” *Project on Asymmetric Narrative Approaches, Medium Blog*, 21 March 2016. <https://medium.com/project-on-asymmetric-narrative-approaches/a-bullet-still-sends-a-message-8612c40dbe78>.

¹⁹ Roger Cohen, “In a World Changed by Oct. 7, Hatred Is Winning,” *The New York Times*, 07 October 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/07/world/middleeast/israel-palestinians-war.html>

²⁰ Major Christopher Telle, “The Influence Machine: Automated Information Operations as a Strategic Defeat Mechanism,” *The Land Warfare Papers*, The Institute of Land Warfare, no 121, October 2018. <https://www.usa.org/sites/default/files/publications/LWP-121-The-Influence-Machine-Automated-Information-Operations-as-a-Strategic-Defeat-Mechanism.pdf>

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Akshat Upadhyay, “Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Warfare: A New Warfighting Paradigm,” *Strategic Analysis*, Volume 48, no 1, 2024, 15-32.

²³ David Lay Williams, “Plato’s Noble Lie: From Kallipolis to Magnesia,” *History of Political Thought*, Vol 34 no 3 (2013): 363-392.

²⁴ Kenneth R Allan, “Marshall McLuhan and the Counterenvironment: “The Medium Is the Message”,” *Art Journal*, Volume 73, no 4 (2014): 22-45.

²⁵ Richard Rorty, “Is Truth a Goal of Enquiry? Davidson vs Wright,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol 45, no 180 (1995): 281-300.

²⁶ Neil Postman, “Propaganda,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Vol 36, no 2 (1979):128-133.