

## STRATEŠKE KOMUNIKACIJE KOT PRILOŽNOST VODITELJEV NATA IN DRŽAV ČLANIC NATA

## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AS A NATO AND NATO NATIONS' LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

**Povzetek** Globalno strateško okolje se je v zadnjem času dramatično spremenilo. Živimo v kompleksnem informacijskem okolju, v katerem se spoprijemamo s hibridnimi grožnjami, terorizmom, informacijskim bojevanjem, kibernetičnimi grožnjami, neregularno vojno, množičnimi migracijami idr. V takem okolju je moralo Severnoatlantsko zavezništvo poiskati pameten odgovor na pojavljajoče se varnostne izzive sodobnega. S tem namenom je bil sprejet Natov koncept strateških komunikacij, ki bi lahko okrepil povezljivost in učinkovitost zavezništva z usklajevanjem komuniciranja, informacij in vseh drugih vojaških aktivnosti.

V članku je opisan Natov koncept strateških komunikacij (StratCom) zaradi zagotovitve boljšega poznavanja in razumevanja koncepta, zmogljivosti in procesov. Razložena je tudi vloga odgovornosti in priložnosti voditelja oziroma poveljnika pri uveljavitvi, izvajanju, vodenju in uporabi Natovega koncepta strateških komunikacij.

**Ključne besede** *Nato, strateške komunikacije, strateško komuniciranje, voditeljstvo, poveljniška odgovornost.*

**Abstract** The global strategic environment has dramatically changed. We live in a highly complex information environment, where we are facing hybrid threats, terrorism, information confrontations, cyber threats, irregular war, massive migration and so on. In this environment, the Alliance needed to adapt and enhance the speed, connectivity and effectiveness of its Strategic Communications (StratCom) effort, which was created as NATO's smart answer to the challenging information environment we live in.

This article describes the NATO Strategic Communications concept to provide deeper understanding and increase knowledge of the context, tools, capabilities and processes conducted within the frame of it. The article explains the role, responsibility

and opportunity leaders at every level have in conducting, leading, implementing and using the NATO concept of Strategic Communications.

**Key words** *NATO, strategic communications, StratCom, leadership, commander responsibility.*

**Introduction** We all live in the Information Age. Contemporary military activities are conducted in a rapidly evolving information environment which is characterized by growing complexity and multidimensionality. We are exposed to a constant flow of information, expansion of information technology, social media and wireless communications, smartphones, networking and a global audience. Information has become an extremely powerful tool and is no longer just an enabler but a fully-fledged national power and weapon. Our perception of the world and of the truth has been manipulated extremely quickly.

The contemporary and future strategic context and operating environment are characterized by complexity, uncertainty, pervasive information and instability. The character of war is changing; today we face a much broader range of threats than in the past. We are faced with hybrid warfare, information confrontation, cyber threats, terrorism and violent extremism, computer-based operations, massive migrations, trans-national organized crime, environmental threats, loss of national identities and much more.

In this context, what Mark Lanity<sup>1</sup> said is a fact: “We are all communicators now” (Laity, 2018, p 66), and his sentence is reflected in numerous NATO documents. For example, the Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communications states that what NATO and its partners say and do, or fail to say and do, has intended and unintended consequences. Every action, image and word sends a message, and every member is a messenger. We must face the fact that all aspects of our work have a critical communications component. Every operation, every action, even the smallest tactical engagement can have strategic consequences. Unintended audiences are unavoidable in the global info environment (MCM-0085-2010). An adequate response of the Alliance to these future challenges seems to be the concept of Strategic Communications (StratCom).

NATO’s leaders first recognized the importance of strategic communications in their Summit Communiqué of 2009, where they stated: “Strategic Communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance’s political and military objectives.” This was just the beginning of developing, adopting and using the concept. After the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the strategic communications concept became reality. In the 2014 Summit Communiqué, NATO’s leaders stated, “We will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats. This will also include enhancing strategic communications.” The

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need was clear, resulting in the Military Committee tasking of 2015 that ultimately led to 2017's Strategic Communications military policy approved document – MC 0628 (Laity 2018, p 67).

The struggle for MC 0628 was the culmination of a 10-year debate, critical discourses, clashes between principals, traditional thinking, influencing and old habits on the question of whether Strategic Communications is the concept the Alliance needs and will be able to use. With MC 0628 NATO has the essential basis for the next stage of the Strategic Communications evolution, with clear definitions, roadmaps, tools and concept development for information and influence in accordance with NATO values. The adopted military policy 0628 is essential, but is only one piece of the overall concept. Now we need to ensure the Strategic Communications concept will reach its potential to help the Alliance (Laity, 2018, pp 65-68) in peace and in crisis.

A decisive component of the full application and implementation of strategic communications is leadership. At all levels, leaders and commanders must understand and enforce the strategic communications concept in their respective organizations. They need to understand and manage the challenges of the information environment, and give strategic communications the opportunity to become a crucial part of comprehensive planning and support for decision-making. The development of the vision as well as the setting of the mission end state are the commander's responsibility, and can support strategic communications (narrative) development. Leaders should be the first to set strategic communications as a mindset and spread it to both the higher and the lower levels of the organization. Leaders must be directly involved in strategic communications. Is it enough?

The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of using and understanding the strategic communications concept's processes and capabilities in responding to the challenges and threats in the contemporary information environment, and to emphasize the role of the leader in this new approach to the synchronization of all actions.

The main thesis of our paper is that leadership at any level and in any organization or structure is the most important enabler, supporter and executer of strategic communications in every environment. For this reason, the commander first needs to understand what the NATO concept of Strategic Communications is, and how to apply it in its units, headquarters, and organizations. Secondly, they need to find their role and responsibility with active engagement in the concept. Leaders need to understand what they and their personal actions communicate and will communicate and then decide how to act. The Strategic Communications concept is a perfect tool for this.

The structure of the article will pursue this thesis and will be divided into two main sections. Firstly, it will present the NATO concept of Strategic Communications

and, secondly, set strategic communications within the context of leadership. Because of its limited length, the article will not incorporate a detailed explanation of leadership. For this purpose, we will use the most general and broad leadership definition, which includes all type of leaders from military (commander) to governmental: leadership is a process for influence which maximizes efforts towards a desired end state.

The term Strategic Communications is still being contested. The article will not include any debate on the terminological challenges with the plural or singular use of communication(s), nor on the word strategic, which covers all levels from tactical to strategic. In the text, we will use the formally approved term “Strategic Communications – StratCom” and its definition (MC 0826, PO 0141, MCM-0085). The abbreviation StratCom for this concept is commonly used and well known, and will as such also be used in this article.

The selected methodology of the article is based on the combination of facts found in numerous documents, books and articles, the author’s personal participant observations, and lessons learned during the author’s deployment in UNIFIL as a contingent commander. The first section will mostly use the descriptive analysis of primary and secondary sources to give a theoretical framework, followed by a more applied section, where author’s assumptions and conclusions will be made through a case study, comparative method of case analysis, and participant observation.

## **1 NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CONCEPT**

### **1.1 What is NATO StratCom?**

NATO defined StratCom as a coordinated and appropriate use of communications activities and capabilities in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims. By Strategic Communications, NATO refers to the synchronization of words and deeds (reducing the say-do gap) and how they will be perceived by selected audiences. Within the framework of StratCom, NATO applies programmes and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with the intended audiences, key leaders, and the general population, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, civil-military relations, and information and psychological operations.

The first definition adopted in 2009 defines StratCom as the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy (PD), Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs (MilPA), Information Operations (InfoOps) and Psychological Operations (PsyOps), as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims (PO 0141, 2009, pp 1-2).

The newest definition of StratCom, in the context of the NATO military, is the integration of communication capabilities and information staff functions with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the Information Environment<sup>2</sup> (IE), in support of NATO's aims and objectives (MC 0628, 2017, p 4)<sup>3</sup>.

StratCom principles are overarching and apply equally to activities and actions, both kinetic and non-kinetic, which have an effect within the IE. StratCom implementation requires unity of effort and relies on the following:

- All activity is founded on NATO's values<sup>4</sup>,
- Activity is driven by objectives derived from Narrative, Policy and Strategy issued within a framework of political-military direction,
- Credibility and trust are vital attributes and must be protected,
- Words and actions must be aligned,
- The IE must be understood,
- Communication is a collective and integrated effort,
- Focus is on achieving (a) desired effect(s) and outcome(s),
- Communication is empowered at all levels.

(MC 0628, 2017, 4 and NATO Strategic Communication Handbook, 2017, p 7).

StratCom is a mindset and is all about understanding and engaging audiences to advance objectives and interests by shaping the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of the population. StratCom is the tool of influence. It uses informing as the most indirect form of force and the most direct form of influence, a counterweight to disinformation and propaganda; aligning actions, images, and words to support

<sup>2</sup> *The Information Environment is defined as the virtual and physical space in which information is received, processed and conveyed. It consists of the information itself and information systems (MC 422/3).*

<sup>3</sup> *For comparison: According to leading civilian (strategic) communication experts (e.g. Werder, Nothaft, Verčič, Zeffass, 2018, pp 333-334) strategic communication [they use the singular form of communication, in contrast to NATO where they use the plural form – Author's note] is an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm and its definition is evolving over time. According to Hallalah's definition, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication practice on behalf of organizations, because it examines organizational communication from an integrated, multidisciplinary perspective by extending ideas and issues grounded in various traditional communication (Hallalah 2007 in Werder, Nothaft, Verčič, Zeffass, 2018, p 334). Later, in 2013, a more comprehensive definition of strategic communication was adopted by Holtzhausen and Zeffass: "the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communication entity to reach set goals" (Holtzhausen and Zeffass in Werder, Nothaft, Verčič, Zeffass, 2018, p 334).*

*US DoD Definition:*

*"Efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen or preserve conditions favourable for the advancement of US government interests, policies and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, themes, messages and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power" (Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept, 2009, p ii)*

*UK Defence Academy:*

*"A systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits that promote and sustain particular types of behaviour" (Tatham, 2008, pp 3-4).*

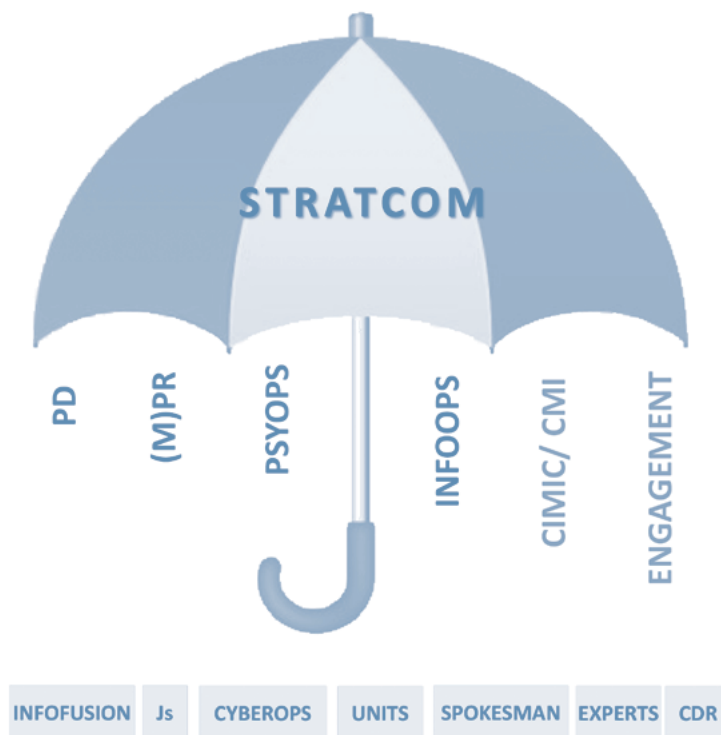
<sup>4</sup> *NATO member states form a unique community of values, committed to the principles of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The Alliance is firmly committed to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and to the Washington Treaty (Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010, p 6).*

policy and military planning, which enable and strengthen the effects to meet overarching strategic objectives.

StratCom tools include the coordinated use of a broad range of instruments, military and civilian, conventional and unconventional, from diplomatic, social-cultural, economic, media and military activities.

From the author's perspective, all the described complexity of Stratcom can be described as an umbrella (Figure 1), under which the framework and story we coordinate and synchronize is all conducted: all the planned activities from communication to the tactical movements of units, with different tools and capabilities in order to reach the maximum effects and desired end state.

Figure 1:  
The StratCom  
Umbrella  
Source:  
Author's own  
design and view  
on StratCom



StratCom is more than just media, PR or communication; it is actually all about perception. Perception is something that takes place in people's minds, and determines peoples choices and, in fact, their behaviour. It is a battle for perception that we need to win.

## 1.2 General descriptions of StratCom functional areas

This sub-section describes the four main functional areas<sup>5</sup> that serve as the basic blocks of NATO StratCom, and a frame of wider effort to enhance the coherence of all information and communication processes, capabilities and activities. The definitions are contained in applicable regulations and NATO military policies, and provide a good understanding of each functional area.

For deeper understanding, the reader needs to know that a revision of these functions and their terminology, definitions, and processes is underway, in order to adapt the policies in selected functional areas, which must be in line with MC 0628. This points to the intent that StratCom will become a discipline which will encompass all four functional areas (InfOps, Psyops, PA and MilPA, PD), and, in the future, maybe even some additional ones (all types of engagement, civil-military relations, key leader engagement – which are defined at the end of this chapter).

This confirms the importance of the MC 0628 Policy on StratCom, which must be the main review reference. As MC 0628 stated, StratCom will direct, coordinate and synchronize the overall communication effort, and will ensure coherence across the communication capabilities and information staff function (MC 0628, 2017, p 7).

### Public Diplomacy

Public Diplomacy is NATO's civilian communications and outreach efforts and tools responsible for promoting awareness of and building understanding and support for NATO's policies, operations and activities, in the short, medium and long term, in complement to the national efforts of the Allies (PO 0141, 2009, pp 1-2).

It gives a political dimension to StratCom through the North Atlantic Council, which provides overall direction and guidance to NATO's StratCom efforts, as well as mission-specific political and strategic guidance for all information activities. The Secretary General provides specific direction and guidance on StratCom to all NATO civilian and military bodies and commands. The Public Diplomacy Division in NATO Headquarters oversees the coordination of all StratCom activities across all NATO bodies and commands, and also directs all public diplomacy activities (MC 0628, 2017).

### Public Affairs and Military Public Affairs

Civilian Public Affairs is NATO's civilian engagement through the media to inform the public of NATO policies, operations and activities in a timely, accurate, responsive, and proactive manner (PO 0141, 2009, pp 1-2).

<sup>5</sup> *Additionally, to enable a better understanding of what StratCom encompasses in the broadest sense of the word, a definition on optional functional areas (civil-military relations, key-leader engagement, etc.) will be presented.*

NATO Military Public Affairs is the function responsible for promoting NATO's military aims and objectives to audiences in order to enhance awareness and understanding of the military aspects of the Alliance. This includes planning and conducting external and internal communications, and community relations. Military Public Affairs, at each level of command, directly supports the commander and may not therefore be further delegated or subordinated to other staff functions. The Secretary General is the principal spokesperson for the Alliance (MC 0457/2, 2011, p 4).

NATO recognizes three basic functions of NATO Military Public Affairs: External Communications (Media Relations, Outreach Activities), Internal Communications and Community Relations, based on five principles: tell and show the NATO story; provide accurate information in a timely manner; ensure that the information provided is consistent and complementary; practice appropriate operational security; and conduct work mindful of multinational sensitivities (MC 0457/2, 2011, pp 4-6).

### Information Operations

Information Operations is a staff function to analyze, plan, assess and integrate Information Activities to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries, potential adversaries, and NAC-approved audiences in support of Alliance mission objectives (MC 0422/5, 2015, p 4).

It supports StratCom by planning to achieve effects and coordinating information activities at the operational and tactical levels, in accordance with the Commander's operational objectives. InfoOps is comprised of three inter-related information activities: preserving and protecting the Alliance's freedom of action in the information environment at all times; focusing on the behaviours, perceptions and attitudes of NAC<sup>6</sup> approved audiences; and focusing on countering an adversary's propaganda as well as their command and control functions and capabilities which support their opinion-forming and decision-making processes (MC 0422/5, 2015, pp 4-5).

Information activities are designed to affect information and/or information systems and may be carried out by any actor. In conducting InfoOps, basic principles must be taken into account: focused and integrated, effect based, coherent and consistent, comprehensively understood, centrally planned, de-centrally executed, continuous, monitored and assessed, and agile. According to MC422/5, InfoOps Activity Areas include influence activities, counter command activities and information protection activities (MC 0422/5, 2015, pp 4-5).

### Psychological Operations

Psychological Operations (PsyOps) are planned activities using methods of communication and other means directed at approved audiences in order to influence

<sup>6</sup> NAC = North Atlantic Council



perceptions, attitudes and behaviour affecting the achievement of political and military objectives (MC 040212, 2012, p 3).

The application of PsyOps can have a significant impact in the long term to influence behaviour and act as a force multiplier and enabler to enhance military capabilities. Its capabilities are not precluded from supporting and providing technical assistance (printing, radio broadcast equipment, and so on) to other StratCom function areas in peace, at home. Psychological Operations are a military act which aims to compel the target audiences to act according to our will, without fighting. In order to preserve NATO credibility, PsyOps activities should be based on true and factual information.

Below are definitions of two additional functional areas, which are not organic StratCom functions, but are in very close relation to the concept, and are important for conducting it.

### **Civil-military interaction and civil-military cooperation**

Civil-Military Interaction (CMI) is defined as a group of activities founded on communication, planning and coordination, that all NATO military bodies share and conduct with international and local non-military actors, both during operations and in preparation for them, which mutually increases the effectiveness and efficiency of their respective actions in response to crises (MC 0411/2. 2014, p 5).

Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) is a joint function comprising a set of capabilities integral to supporting the achievement of mission objectives and enabling NATO commands to participate effectively in a broad spectrum of CMI with diverse non-military actors (MC 0411/2. 2014, p 5).

### **Key leader, civil-military, target audience engagements**

NATO's agreed definition for engagement is as follows: any form of human interaction aimed at delivering influential messages in support of the overall Campaign Objectives. Engagement is a distinct activity from civil-military interaction and liaison, which is conducted for purposes other than influence (NATO Engagement Handbook, 2017).

Traditionally, engagement is focused only on the key leader, but recent operations have emphasized that the engagement of commanders at all levels, other civil-military personnel and all kinds of different political-military professionals (e.g. a military chaplain engages with a local religious leader, a mine expert engages the population around a minefield) can have an impact on behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions. Engagement should be consistent, coordinated, culturally-sensitive, credible, adaptive, balanced, and pragmatic within the framework of a given narrative.

## 2 LEADERSHIP PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN STRATCOM

According to MC0628, StratCom in NATO is a command responsibility that spans all levels. Successful implementation and use requires clear direction and guidance incorporating the commander's intent into all aspects of staff activities, especially in the operational planning process and during the conduct of operations (MC 0628, 2017). The leader's or commander's vision, intent and philosophy represent the framework which will enable their operation to be conducted in all environments, in the field or within the organization. One of the basic principles and commander's responsibilities at all levels<sup>7</sup> with regard to their involvement in the StratCom processes and with the focus on team work approach, is synchronization and coordination.

Under the MC 0628 policy, the communication capabilities and the information staff function must be grouped together under a Chief StratCom<sup>8</sup> (or similar title), who has coordination and integration authority, in accordance with the Commander's intent, to issue appropriate direction and guidance in order to ensure the integration of StratCom. It sees StratCom moving from a purely advisory/coordination function to that of holding the Commander's delegated authority and ensuring it is fully integrated with other activities (MC 0628, 2017), with direct access to the commander as the final and decisive enabler of the effective use and conduct of StratCom activities.

The Handbook for Military StratCom states that the commanders [leaders – Author's note] must accept their key role in their organization's communications orchestration. When senior leaders ignore the importance of communication they seriously undermine the value of major initiatives of their organization. Ineffective communication can cause ambiguity and confusion, and damage credibility inside and outside the organization (MilStratCom Handbook, 2018, p 9).

From the author's viewpoint<sup>9</sup> the leader's main role in StratCom can be divided into four groups, described below in next four sub-sections:

- Understand the concept and set the conditions for its implementation;
- Provide the vision and objectives (end state) on which the narrative should be built;
- Put StratCom at the heart of operational planning from the beginning;
- Be active in conducting StratCom, with key leader engagement, media communication engagements, direct communication, social media engagement, internal communication, etc.

<sup>7</sup> The "Strategic Corporal" concept confirms the fact that we are all communicators and the action of the last soldier on the ground can have significant strategic consequences, which is why conducting StratCom at all levels is so important, even for a team leader somewhere in the operation.

<sup>8</sup> In enacting the key organizational and structural guidelines to group the communication capabilities and information staff function together in a single staff element carrying executive authority, the principle of mission command must be respected, giving commanders flexibility in how the overarching guidance is implemented.

<sup>9</sup> According to the author's experience: lessons learned from command and different staff functions and analysis of the relevant literature, most of it listed in the references and presented in this article.

## 2.1 Understanding and implementing StratCom in the organization

According to the NATO Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communications, StratCom is a leadership-driven process focused on enhancing the Alliance's ability to coherently articulate its narratives, themes, and messages to external and internal audiences. NATO StratCom provides strategic political and military guidance and direction based on a North Atlantic Council approved information strategy (MCM-0085-2010, p 1). For this reason, nations should understand, implement and possibly use the concept of StratCom, which is not always easy. Nations are members of the NATO alliance, not militaries, so the agreed and accepted StratCom policy should be used and applied nationwide in accordance with national limitations and its special features.

The first step in recognizing this is the responsibility of the leaders/commanders, who need to understand the importance of StratCom in the contemporary world and recognize the utility of this concept for their leadership level and the structure they lead. And it must start at the very top – from the national level, ministry level, military level, all the way down to the strategic corporal level on the ground.

Positive changes within an organization can be real, but they depend to a considerable extent on the skills, determination, knowledge and imagination of current leaders. They enable an organization to look outside the box, think for itself, develop new ideas, suggest smart changes, use a comprehensive approach and coordinate all level activities in order to reach the desired end state and maximize the effects which can lead to a successful transformation. StratCom, through a common appreciation and thorough understanding of the mission, the Information Environment, and the impact it has on all activities, can be a leadership opportunity for this.

According to the documents, the significant ongoing improvement in NATO commanders' awareness of the power of StratCom must be maintained. This development area needs to focus on identifying the steps to strengthen the knowledge, expertise, mindset and capabilities development of NATO and national commanders in recognizing and operationalizing the principles of good StratCom, both internally within the command and externally as an important part of carrying out assigned missions (MCM-0085-2010, p 9); especially because of the fact written in the article “The role of military leadership in StratCom”, where it is stated that only properly exercised leadership is the ultimate condition of achieving the desired effect, including the required influence results concerning specific audiences and conveying accurate information to the public (KacaŁa, 2016, p 33).

Establishing the role of the commander as a champion for StratCom is the key to the success of the implementation and efficient use of this concept. This provides an accurate and effective response to challenges and threats in the information environment at every functional level. Leaders enable the development and

integration of the StratCom concept<sup>10</sup>, process, resources and capabilities in their organizations, nations, allied operations and everyday work. They are the start and the end point of effective StratCom, with their vision and intent and through their authority.

## 2.2 From commander vision, intent to narrative

The commander's second opportunity, conducted as StratCom promotion and use, is well paraphrased in Plato's quote: "Those who tell the stories rule society<sup>11</sup>." Leaders lead the narrative in such a way that mission command and vision come into play and are integrally linked to the strategy.

A narrative is an organizational scheme expressed in story form. Stories about a community's history provide models of how actions and consequences are linked. Stories are often the basis for strategies and actions, as well as for interpreting others' intentions (FM 3-24, 2006). Narratives give a simple answer to who we are; where are we coming from; what benefits are we bringing to whom; where are we going to; and what is next.

Leaders need to consider information as currency, audience perception of the organization's narrative as a dominant market force, reputation as long-term stock, and influence as the bottom line. Communications can no longer play a supporting role to strategy, once written. It must become strategy's beating heart (Osborne, 2017, 14). The leader must recognize information as an enabler and effector, because as Joseph Nye said, in the information age it is not only whose army wins, but whose story wins. Accordingly the biggest challenge is to create and control a narrative which connects the power of words to the legitimacy of deeds (Nye, 2009, p 62)<sup>12</sup>.

According to the mission command policy, it is essential to implement StratCom effectively and in a timely way. It also requires the empowering of each level to adapt, integrate and implement appropriately according to their circumstances in order to achieve the desired effect (MC 0628, 2017). StratCom is crucial for commanders; it is inherent to commander's mission command through his intent. The commander's intent is a statement on which the narrative will be established. There is only one narrative and therein lies its strength; it explains who we are, it determines our identity and we adhere to it (Erder, 2013, p 33).

<sup>10</sup> *And even give direction and guidance to modify existing organizational structures as recommended in StratCom documents and in accordance with their organization specifics. Leaders must consider StratCom a priority comparable to other important areas such as logistics and intelligence (MCM-0085-2010, 3).*

<sup>11</sup> *Full Plato quote: Tell your story, tell it efficiently and protect it, because those who tell the stories rule society. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/20382-those-who-tell-the-stories-rule-society>*

<sup>12</sup> *One of the most significant examples of how narrative wins perception can be found in the 2016 American elections. According to Randy Olson, in the United States 2016 presidential election, president-elect Donald Trump won because his narrative won: "America was once great. America is no longer great. I will make America great again." Trump demonstrated no depth. Shared no policy points. And seemingly went out of his way to offend people like no other candidate ever has. And yet he won. He is an example of a leader with deep narrative intuition (Olson, 2019). It confirms our assumption that narrative is leadership.*

### 2.3 StratCom at the heart of all levels of military policy, planning and execution

NATO recognizes that it cannot resolve a crisis or conflict by military force alone. There is therefore a need for a comprehensive approach – deliberate and inclusive (civil and military) planning and action created through established crisis management procedures that allow both military and non-military resources and efforts to be assembled with a greater unity of purpose. Adopting such a comprehensive approach to operations begins with inculcating a culture of active collaboration and transparency in those involved in military planning, with the commander at the head.

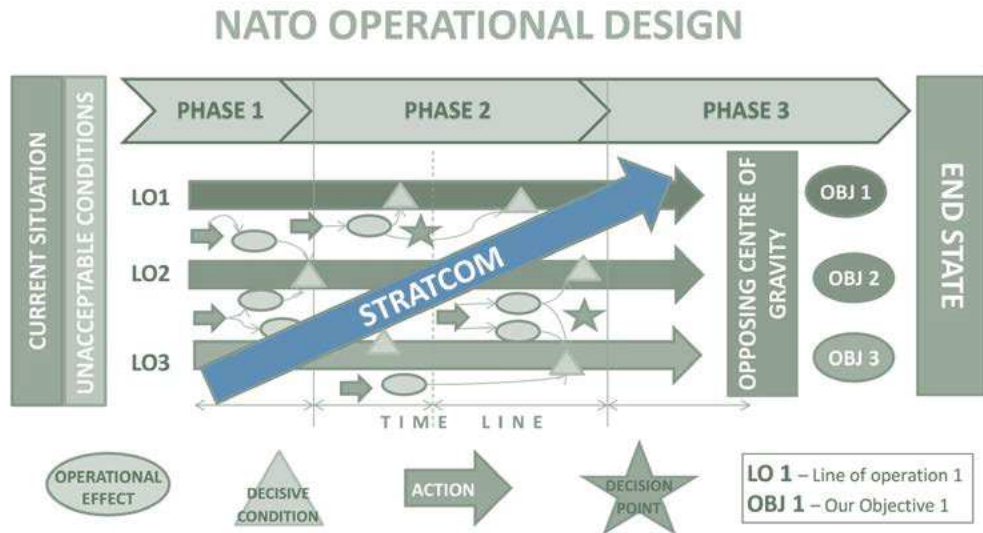
The nature of modern conflict blurs the lines of the traditional definitions of peace and war, and because of that StratCom must be organized and active in a way that is effective during peacetime, crisis and conflict. This will require changes in policy and organization to improve how the Alliance plans, coordinates and executes its activities. Processes must be more integrated, simpler and quicker in order to ensure that information and communication aspects are at the core of all levels of policy, planning and implementation, and are fully integrated with other operational effects (MC 0628, 2017).

StratCom seeks to put information strategy at the heart of all levels of policy, planning and implementation or execution. Furthermore, as Mark Laity said: “What we need is a StratCom Plan with an Operational Annex”. StratCom is not an additional activity but an inherent part of the planning, coordination and conduction of all military operations and activities. As part of the overarching political-military approach to StratCom, the vision is to put this concept at the heart of all levels of military policy, planning and execution – this is the commander’s responsibility and care. Leaders should coordinate and synchronize capabilities and instruments of all power within their area of responsibility to achieve the desired effects.

This is not to say that StratCom is only important in irregular warfare, because it also focuses on selected audiences beyond the local population. As such, StratCom is critical across range of military operations (Commander’s Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy, 2010, p I-1). In order to achieve joint effects and more effectively approach, the desired end state StratCom should diagonally connect all the lines of operational design from the first phase of operation onwards, as shown in Figure 2.

Exploitation of information, the need for a more integrated force, and better adaptability to the changing circumstances are three central ideas at the heart of the enhanced joint action. Influence can be achieved by a clear focus on audiences and effects, and by integrating and synchronizing kinetic and non-kinetic activities conducted across the physical and virtual domains to try to achieve those effects (Joint Concept Note 1/17, p 5).

Figure 2:  
StratCom  
enhancing and  
orchestrating  
joint  
Source: Author's  
own design  
actions<sup>13</sup> from  
the beginning of  
the planning of  
every operation



All activities and operations have a critical communication component because everything we say and do, or fail to say and do, has intended and unintended consequences, with intended and unintended audiences. This is why leaders must undertake a comprehensive assessment of potential StratCom outcomes when they plan operations (MCM-0085-2010, p 2). By using StratCom, commanders can do things differently, with better and more effective integration of information and physical activities across multiple domains, and gain more effects in conducting and enhancing joint actions (JCN 2/18).

General John R. Allen<sup>14</sup> described StratCom as his most responsive manoeuvre element. According to his opinion and practical experience, information must be treated in the same way as a component of combined arms, indeed as a weapon (Eder, 2013, p 39).

Commanders must involve StratCom (with clear intent, directions and guidance) in the ongoing planning process, to advise the Joint Operations Planning Group (JOPG) leader and to ensure that StratCom plays a guiding role and assists the senior leadership in all aspects of integrated communication, synchronized with all other military activities.

<sup>13</sup> <sup>13</sup> Joint action is defined as the deliberate use and orchestration of military capabilities and activities to affect an actor's will, understanding and capability, and the cohesion between them to achieve influence (JDP 3-00, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> He was the ISAF Commander for the period July 2012-February 2013.

## 2.4 Leaders must be active in conducting StratCom activities

Leaders must decisively engage, conduct and drive StratCom even in the execution<sup>15</sup> phase, and must make it a priority. The success of StratCom depends on gaining support for our narrative/ story, and the engine of this is the leader<sup>16</sup>.

Policy on this requires leaders to maintain awareness of information released and the ability to refine this information as necessary to ensure its accuracy. Commanders must balance the requirement for speed in the release of information with legitimate concerns for its accuracy and the demands of operational security (MCM-0085-2010, 8).

Active engagement in delivering StratCom activities is a process of communicating the commander's intent, vision and narrative by integrating words and deeds, with the leader in the front line. Below are listed what are considered as the most useful StratCom tools for commanders:

- Key leader engagement is one of the most important engagements of the commander. It involves the commander's contact with the leaders who represent the selected target audience, in order to change the behaviour of decision-makers and gain some useful suggestions and information in order to conduct the operation in the direction of the desired end state.
- Media communication engagements, when needed and planned to involve the commander, can help to communicate to the wider public the topics which need to be delivered by the authority to gain special effects, raise credibility or achieve other planned effects. Media engagement can be conducted in various ways: an interview, short media statements, guest speaker in TV shows or radio, images and so on.
- Using social media engagement is significant for commanders in order to share their expertise, to communicate, to be part of a community, to build trust, to get feedback, to be a good example to follow, to stay relevant and many other things. Many leaders are still uncomfortable about being present on social media platforms (such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn etc.). The fact that adversaries use it and the numbers of participants mean it is crucial to have a presence there<sup>17</sup>.
- Internal communication is a very important StratCom tool. It can be used from the commander's side to inform, to deliver a message, to motivate or educate, to influence from the bottom up, to develop situational awareness, to provide understanding of the IE, to guide future planning efforts, or to simply answer questions or solve a problem.

<sup>15</sup> And later in the assessment and evaluation phase, to ensure improvements in the process, adapt operations if needed, estimate performance and effects, collect lessons learned, monitor, provide bottom-up feedback etc.

<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that the commander (or spokesperson) is the best communicator of our story, because people know that the commander's (communicator's) role is to address the audience. The best communicators are our soldiers, who have credibility on the ground.

<sup>17</sup> According to statistics from January 2019, approximately 2 billion internet users use social networks. Facebook is the primary social media app, currently sitting at 2.27 billion monthly active users, followed by Whatsapp with 1.5 billion users, and the photo-sharing app Instagram with 1 billion monthly active accounts. (The most popular social networks worldwide: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>).

- There are many others, such as formal and informal speeches or other public performances (e.g. ribbon cutting at an opening, public ceremonies, etc.), shaping the environment with PPP (Presence, Posture and Profile), photo sessions, round tables, and so on.

A brief preview of good and bad instances of “say-do gaps”<sup>18</sup> shows one fact. In bad examples, there should not be criticism of the soldiers on the ground; there should be criticism of the leaders, and of those who prepared them, or rather failed to prepare them. As a commander you need to prepare your “strategic corporal” not to commit individual tactical mistakes, because they can have powerful negative strategic effects.

StratCom is the primary tool of the commander to appropriately inform and influence audiences through actions and words. How the military gained advantage by affecting the perception and behaviour of the target audience has been seen throughout history. From the past we can also learn how some great leaders knew and used information and communications in line with their actions to influence audiences and reach the desired end state by selling their narrative, affecting perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

### Examples of StratCom used by NATO and NATO nation’s leaders in practice

The military and political footprint of the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War – Trident Juncture 2018 (TRJE18) – was significant in every aspect of the operation, especially in the set objectives of StratCom. This exercise in central and eastern Norway was a highly visible exercise on land, in the air and at sea<sup>19</sup> which had StratCom implications in reality.

Two parallel StratCom stories in TRJE18 were conducted, both with full support of the leadership. One was the NATO story, where they tried to demonstrate that the Alliance has the political will and ability to defend its members, and signalled to Russia that it would not be able to paralyze NATO by creating information warfare and a military threat on its northern and eastern flanks. The other was the Norwegian StratCom approach, whose mission was to explain and communicate why NATO

<sup>18</sup> Some examples of the say-do gap:

- American soldiers urinating on the dead bodies of the Taliban was considered by President Karzai “inhuman”, and was far from the intended message that the soldiers were there to support the Afghanistan population and to respect their culture and lives.
- Very young American men preaching about survival to Afghans old enough to be their grandfathers. There was no respect for age shown in any of the local encounters PBS filmed (Commander’s Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy, 2010, p N-1).
- General Stanley McCrystal stopping fire rocketing on the Sunnis from a nearby village with engagement. When he realized the course of the rocketing and helped the village, they gave full support, not only peace (Eder, 2013, p 33).

<sup>19</sup> Around 50,000 participants from 31 nations, 10,000 vehicles, 65 vessels and around 250 aircraft attended a fourteen day exercise from 25 October to 7 November 2018. In parallel with TRJE18 three big exercises took place in the Baltic Sea and Poland (Northern Coast, Anakonda and ARRCADe Fusion 2018) ([https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_158620.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_158620.htm)).



came to Norway on exercise, in the largest exercise since the Cold War, without scaring the citizens, and gaining the full support of the country's population.

An analysis and comparison of StratCom activities in TRJE18 from a leadership point of view, according to the author's four points (listed in chapter 3) where leaders have the main role in StratCom<sup>20</sup>, is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Leaders' support of the StratCom concept, processes and activities in TRJE18  
**Source:** Author analysis from: PO(2018)0116; PDD(2018)0111; <https://twitter.com/jensstoltenberg>, [https://twitter.com/forsvaret\\_no/](https://twitter.com/forsvaret_no/); <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/exercises/trident-juncture-18>; Wojciech, 2018; <https://forsvaret.no/en/exercise-and-operations/exercises/nato-exercise-2018>.

	Understanding and implementing StratCom	Providing the vision and objectives	StratCom in operational planning	Conducting StratCom by leaders
NATO Secretary General	Implemented StratCom at highest level of Public Diplomacy Division/ StratCom	Strategic direction and guidance given by the StratCom Framework, the TRJE18 Information Environment Assessment (IEA) Handbook, and the Integrated Communications Plan for Exercise Trident Juncture 2018. Five StratCom objectives:	StratCom as part of NATO's Operational Planning Process – Comprehensive Operations Planning	Addressing different audiences, key leader engagement, press conferences, participating in high ranking social activities, social media engagement.
TRJE18 Commander	In the exercise environment the StratCom structure was formed as the NATO Media Information Centre (working in exercise and in real life). In Joint Headquarters in Naples, StratCom was implemented according to NATO policy MC0628.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Generate recognition and support from Allied audiences that NATO is capable, united, and ready to protect its Allies.</li> <li>2. For Russia: the Alliance will protect its citizens and territory in order to contribute to deterrence and risk reduction.</li> <li>3. Demonstrate to Norway that NATO is fundamental to their defence.</li> <li>4. Finnish and Swedish audiences recognize benefits of joint training.</li> <li>5: Demonstrate to all audiences the transparent and defensive nature of NATO in the interest of peace and stability.</li> </ol>	With OASIS <sup>21</sup> Integrated Communications Plan on TRJE18	Internal Communications, conducting media activities, key leader engagement, cooperation with host nations, coordination of all military activities in line with the StratCom narrative and guidance

<sup>20</sup> The role of leadership in the analyzed case is not as obvious as in the case of the US presidential election in 2016, described in footnote 12. The leadership role in TRJE18 can be derived by knowing the structure of the organizations involved, knowing the narrative and objective of the mission, checking written documents on the topics, and conducting information awareness and assessment which showed the presence of StratCom in the planning process. All these activities must be strongly supported and directed by the leaders. We can gain direct insights by analyzing leader/commander activities and engagement within the framework of StratCom's set objectives (mostly from open source reports and the leaders' social media engagement).

<sup>21</sup> The OASIS Model is a model for the planning and implementation of StratCom and stands for Objective, Audience insight, Strategy, Implementation, and Scoring.

	Understanding and implementing StratCom	Providing the vision and objectives	StratCom in operational planning	Conducting StratCom by leaders
Tactical leaders and "strategic corporal"	If needed, but at this level the leaders' understanding of the StratCom concept and the incorporation of it into their OPORDERS is enough.	Soldiers card, media cards, clear and transparent key messages, awareness of information environment.	Include StratCom top-down guidance at appropriate level of military decision-making in accordance with unit purpose and task.	Use of Social media leaders/ influencers, tactical engagement with civil environment, care for nature, CIMIC projects, local leaders engagement. Use of air power to show strength and capabilities, coordinating military activities with words.
Norwegian Minister of Defence and Armed Forces Chief of Defence	They have developed national StratCom. At the defence level they have Ministry of Defence's communication unit and the Chief of Defence's spokesperson	NATO came to Norway to Exercise, in the largest exercise since the Cold War, to ensure our nation's sovereignty and the safety of our population.	According to Forsvarets mediesenter they carry out planning through long term planning, within which they build situational awareness, define clear goals, develop narrative and key messages etc. according to the analysis of environment and NATO guidance.	All levels of governmental and military leaders were fully active in TRJE18. Even His Majesty Prince Harald came to the exercise to show support and spread the messages. CIMIC, environmental projects, engagement with leaders and local population, addressing different target audiences.

According to the context of Table 1 and the final output of the exercise TRJE18<sup>22</sup>, we can conclude that all levels of leaders of NATO and NATO nations, from both the political and the military side, took StratCom as an organizational opportunity and tool to effectively reach the set objectives and the desired end state. They used StratCom as an executive capability whose fully integrated communications functions with other aspects of military operations (fires/manoeuvres).

<sup>22</sup> Some facts which indicate that TRJE was a successful exercise: media coverage in more than 600 articles on TRJE18; 90% of the Norwegian population believe that it is necessary to have armed forces, 70% of them have a good impression of NATO, more online conversation than any other exercise, Russia disinformation campaign was managed and did not have any influence on TRJE or the Alliance at that time.

Being a UNIFIL<sup>23</sup> Contingent commander<sup>24</sup> gave the author the same experience in a leadership role in StratCom as has been presented on a doctrinal basis in this article. Even if this was a UN mission, the way NATO countries plan and conduct military operations under different organizations is the NATO working process in the frame of the mission mandate and rules of engagement. In today's working and operating environment, StratCom is one of the most important tools a commander can use. UNIFIL is a peace mission where, with the consent of all the involved parties, soldiers provide peace and security through reporting, presence and observation. In such a fragile and unstable environment as South Lebanon, this is not always the easiest task, since every action you do wrong can have a strategic impact on the overall security situation. In such missions a high level of competence and maturity of the decision-maker is crucial. By understanding and implementing StratCom<sup>25</sup>, a commander can make a change in the conduct of the mission. This, in continuous coordination with all other military activities, brings a greater effect towards the set objectives, effective fulfilment of the mandate, and increased force protection in the long term. This is evidenced by the author's experience in trying to normalize the local attitude and lack of acceptance, which was very aggressive and unkind towards the Slovenian contingent. This was achieved by conducting planned, approved, and synchronized contingent commander StratCom activities, such as KLE with the sector Commander, CIMIC engagement in UNIFIL, social event participation, key message spreading and so on. All commander activities were in orchestration with the tactical military activities and soldiers' PPP. After six months of the Sector West Joint Task Force's planned approach to StratCom, the Slovenian Contingent were able to normalize the local attitude towards Slovenian soldiers and they were accepted.

Commanders who enable an organization to think for itself, to develop ideas, build a narrative, give directions and guidance from the top, coordinate from the bottom up, and know the audience and information environment are likely to be more successful. StratCom gives a perfect framework for this.

### Conclusion – StratCom is a leadership tool and opportunity

StratCom is an important, useful and smart NATO concept developed as an answer to the challenging and contemporary information environment we live in. StratCom is the crossroads between public diplomacy and smart defence, which is essential in the coordination of communication and all other activities in the frame or narrative and in the way of the desired end state in war, crisis and peace time. StratCom is a demanding and complex concept which must be understood, commander led, and fully integrated into the organizational efforts to achieve maximum effect. Figure 3

<sup>23</sup> UNIFIL is the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon.

<sup>24</sup> The author, Major Nina Raduha, spent 7 months (May-December 2016) in the UNIFIL mission in South Lebanon, under the Sector West Joint Task Force Lebanon. She commanded the 22<sup>nd</sup> Slovenian contingent in UNIFIL and conducted the mission mandate – maintain peace and security and freedom of movement, and work with the Lebanon Armed forces.

<sup>25</sup> In UN terminology, integrated outreach activities are comparable to NATO StratCom, without PsyOps.



Confirming both theses from the beginning of the article, we can claim that leadership at all levels plays the most important role in the implementation and enforcement of StratCom in their organization and structures. Accordingly, leaders need to understand in depth what this concept is, and how important it is in fighting hybrid warfare, coordinating the effect of units on the ground, or gaining the credibility of our organization at home in peace. They need to recognize their role and responsibility with active engagement in StratCom.

In short, StratCom is a function, process and mindset which, in full implementation and use, brings organizational changes, education needs and a shift in traditional conducting, (military) planning, and operating. StratCom is an integral part of the political and/or military decision-making process, strategy and consistency, and can become a whole-of-government effort to reach the desired end state. StratCom supports long term effects, by which true synchronization and orchestration of our words and deeds with integration of all communication capabilities, information staff function and other military activities is reached. All StratCom activities are founded on NATO's values. Stratcom is an interdisciplinary approach, led from the top in the framework of the narrative.

StratCom is as a leadership opportunity. It is a commander's instrument of power and influence, and a coordinator and orchestrator of their activities. Leaders are enablers of the concept and multifaceted players of its efficiency. They need to understand that all actions have an effect in the information environment and spread this within the framework of their responsibility.

The concept is a long-term action, in the success of which the leadership needs first to believe. Leaders have three main responsibilities:

- Understand the concept, process and capabilities of StratCom;
- Implement the StratCom concept, build its capabilities and put it in the centre of decision-making in their organizations;
- Lead the StratCom process by giving overall direction and guidance and executing it.

Leaders should place a high priority on communication. Successful StratCom, with integrating actions, words, and images, begins with a clear, top-guided, coordinated leadership intent and guidance that results in narrative building and is considered in the operational planning process.

Whether or not to have StratCom should no longer be a question. In implementing and successfully conducting it, it would be good to keep in mind that StratCom is a mindset and needs to be command-led. Only leaders can enable the adoption and successful implementation of StratCom, but in order to make it work, each and every member must work in line with the adopted narrative.

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