Strategic Communication – A Synchronised Effort for Information Dissemination by Pakistan

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To win a hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill.

To subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence.[i]

Today, Pakistan is at the centre of the world. The battlespace as we know it is changing from the dominance of kinetic power to a global theatre preponderantly influenced by information. Irrespective of who achieves the kinetic victory, the party that succeeds in the occupation of the infosphere battlespace, in the context of the events, actions and reactions of Pakistan, its allies and adversaries, will shape the future of strategic relations for the next fifty years.

In recognising the complexity of the infosphere battlespace in the fourth generation warfare that Pakistan is currently engaged in, I have attempted to outline the significance of formulating a comprehensive and coherent strategy for the dissemination of information considering that our adversaries have been very busy in making sure that their capacity to disseminate and diffuse information, which is detrimental to our national interests, is exponentially enhanced, for which even the leading nations are finding it difficult to counter. This paper outlines the essence of the relatively new concept of Strategic Communication and how it can contribute to winning the information war that we are currently facing.

Pakistan is in the midst of a war of ideas that cannot be won by force, against an enemy that is increasing its capacity for sophisticated global information dissemination, through highly professional and synchronised propaganda mechanisms that are able to adapt to the latest communications technologies, exploit electronic media to recruit supporters globally, and influence national and international policy-making by dominating the information domain. We must recognise that we cannot gauge our success in simply defeating an enemy on the battlefield, as the '*centre of gravity*' is no longer territorial but the people of this nation.

In this asymmetric battlespace, the coalition of parties under the banner of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and their foreign sympathisers do not have the capacity to directly engage conventional military forces, however, their strategic use of indiscriminate homicide bombings are calculated to act, not directly through the number of casualties, but, through the

manipulation of information using a variety of media as force multipliers by influencing specific target audiences. It is therefore imperative that Pakistan realises that they cannot counter information and psychological warfare with precision guided weapons and other munitions. Only our own focused information and psychological operations to ultimately win over the '*hearts and minds*' of the people can do this.

In the rapidly globalising world we are constantly being inundated with information that is made prevalent for defined reasons and with explicit content to create a precise cognitive effect to influence our decision-making, and hence, produce a particular behavioural response. The competition between advertising companies is a testament to the production of new and increasingly complex marketing models and techniques to produce this cognitive effect on their target audiences, such as the manipulation of subliminal processes. Their foundations, and profits, rest upon the understanding that their audience, whether a single individual or whole nation, senses the information that is constantly being carried by the rapidly increasing international connectivity. This is also true of the competition for the centre of gravity in Pakistan. To be effective, information must be internalised by the audience so as to create a set of perceptions that are favourable to the party constructing it. These perceptions must continuously be built upon to consolidate the original message and to counter any reactive campaign by opposing parties. The

reinforcement of these perceptions can produce a set of beliefs, which in turn lead to observable behavioural responses.

The key to the construction of the '*information packet*' is to have a precise and clear comprehension of the objective; a thorough understanding of the cultural intricacies of the target audience; a message that is specifically tailor-made for the audience; a delivery method formulated according to the receptiveness and facilities available to the audience; and finally, a mechanism for the measurement of the success of the endeavour. There is a scientific facet in the creation of information to produce a particular effect, especially when we include an element of measurement. However, this should not be used as a distraction from concentrating upon the rationale behind the effort. One of the principle reasons that the United States and its Allies are failing in their counter-insurgency effort in Afghanistan is that they have not produced a

harmonized and synchronised response to the insurgent's efforts because of the continuously mixed messages being produced from the lack of inter-agency coordination and inability to comprehend the cultural diversity and variegated ethnic make-up of Afghanistan. The U.S. led operation '*Moshtarak*' (meaning 'together' in Dari: initiated, 13 February 2010) may

eventually be successful as a short-term military operation to oust Taliban forces from the city of Marjah, Helmand, however, the operation contradicts earlier long-term overtures for negotiations with the Taliban, whilst the name given to the operation is in Dari Farsi, which is not the local language in the overwhelmingly Pushtun Helmand Province, will be culturally perceived as a representation of an occupation force from Northern Afghanistan within which the Pushtun are an ethnic minority. Furthermore, the Afghan National Army, which reportedly represents a significant proportion of the forces supporting the U.S.-led operation, is disproportionately non-Pushtun, which further compounds the Pushtun perception of an ethnic occupation force from Northern Afghanistan; thereby, creating added disaffection amongst the majority Pushtun population of Afghanistan.

Superficially, the situation may not present itself as such; however, Pakistan is increasingly becoming entrenched in a conflict within which it is being portrayed as an occupation force inside its own borders through consistent information and psychological operations by the Taliban and its foreign sympathisers: "*our democratically elected leaders and their state apparatus increasingly behave like an occupation force. Perhaps given our ever increasing concession to the US, one can actually regard the Pakistani state as a proxy occupation force for the US*"[ii]. A critical analysis highlights specific core reasons for the protraction of the insurgency and includes the state's neglect in the

incorporation of a focused strategic agenda and long-term security policy within a national legislative framework; the inheritance of draconian laws that have not facilitated the development of a national identity amongst certain sections of Pakistani society, in particular those residing in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA); and, the deficiency of a synchronised inter-agency communications doctrine at all levels of the security and governance apparatus.

The United States has recently been developing the concept of '*Strategic Communication*', which concentrates upon the necessity of a coordinated strategic

approach to the dissemination of information in the pursuit of national power, goals and interests to influence the perceptions and behaviours of a target audience by understanding, listening and engaging it within a conversation or dialogue. However, strategic communication goes further than synchronising a message across all government departments and agencies, it seeks the complete amalgamation of information through all instruments of national power not only to disseminate the message but also to ensure that it is reflected by the government's actions on the ground, where words are matched by conduct. Strategic Communication is therefore intrinsically proactive and not reactive to events and situations. It binds

communication to national strategy and policy, and directs their implementation. If implemented correctly, with foresight and vigour, strategic communication can shape the future battlespace from months to years in advance, providing time to build and secure relationships whilst effectively dissuading or deterring existing or potential rivals. Strategic Communications can be differentiated from information and psychological operations because they are constituent components, but also because public affairs, public relations, and public diplomacy are also fundamental components that have to work in synchronisation. In effect, an all-government approach is provided by the concept of Strategic Communications. Nevertheless, as a relatively new concept, it is a daunting task even for the United States, as recently declared by Admiral Michael Mullen (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S.):

Our messages lack credibility because we haven't invested enough in building trust and relationships, and we haven't always delivered on promises... We hurt

ourselves more when our words don't align with our actions. Our enemies regularly monitor the news to discern coalition and American intent as weighed against the efforts of our forces... We cannot capture hearts and minds. We must engage them; we must listen to them, one heart and one mind at a time—over time.[iii]

To further compound the situation, several U.S. agencies have provided their own interpretations of the concept without the provision for a mutually agreed consensus on a single unified definition of strategic communication. These hurdles are set to continue as inter-departmental rivalries persist. Nevertheless, a current definitional guideline can be found in the Department of Defence's 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR), Strategic Communication Execution Roadmap, as follows:

Focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen or preserve conditions favourable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronised with other elements of national power.[iv]

Although this definition is vague and imprecise, as the rest of the inter-agency community does not subscribe or adhere to it[v], it does provide an insight into the processes that can be implemented in Pakistan, and the pitfalls that should be avoided. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeper into definitional issues, however, the U.S. Army's definition provided in December 2008 does shed further light on the concept and prioritises the need to mould the information environment and the intrinsic nature of

media access to information for the facilitation of Strategic Communications.[vi] Furthermore, the latest Quadrennial Defence Review published in February 2010 does address on-going concerns on the lack of coordination being achieved in inter-agency collaboration in respect to Strategic Communications, and goes as far as prioritising and placing emphasis on it within counter insurgency, stability and counterterrorism operations outside the United States[vii]. Nevertheless, since this is a concept that is currently evolving and has not stood the test of time, and it would be in the interest of Pakistani civil and military authorities to closely gauge the real-time and medium-term impacts it may have on current and future developments on the infosphere battlespace. Primary divisions within the official Pakistani communications network are essentially between the military and civil branches. The Inter-Services Public Relations Directorate of the military is fundamentally responsible for all public communications within the military, while the Information Ministry and the Foreign Affairs Ministry (Public Affairs Office) are responsible for government communications. The Strategic Communications concept would therefore suggest the creation of an overarching umbrella organisation that would facilitate inter-agency participation through a mutually agreed understanding of Strategic Communications, which would include the elements of national power, such as government (relevant ministries include, Foreign, Information, Interior, and Finance), diplomatic, military, economic, intelligence (civil as well as military), law enforcement and other internal security services, as well as the judiciary for legal guidance. Those agencies that are responsible for information, computer network and psychological operations would also be integrated and begin to function under the direction and umbrella of Strategic Communications.

The central concept of Strategic Communications concentrates on perceptions and how to strategically change or redirect them within a given target audience and with the aid of the whole spectrum of media and communication instruments so as to fundamentally align them with our national security policy objectives and goals, which is yet to be defined. However, communication is not always strategic and the lines between its strategic, operational and tactical facets are seldom distinct, but rather imprecise and quite hazy, as testified by Admiral Michael Mullen:

We get hung up on that word, strategic. If we've learned nothing else in this war [*war on terror*], it should be that the lines between the strategic, operational and tactical are blurred almost beyond distinction. This is particularly true in the field of communication, where videos and images are plastered on the web – or even the idea of them being so posted – can and often do drive national security decision-making. With the aggressive use of technology, the tactical become the strategic in the blink of an eye.[viii]

Therefore, in our formulation of Strategic Communication, we must be cognisant of the multi-faceted and spectrum-wide implications of any communication. Emily Goldman (2007) observes that successful strategic communication can only be achieved when the four principle domains of communication are effectively satisfied[ix]:

- **Physical Domain** – words must match the deeds and vice versa

- **Information Domain** – information is transmitted through mediums or communication channels that are relevant and trustworthy to the target audience, and where the messenger must have credibility with that audience to be effective.

- **Social Domain** – the historical, cultural, and traditional traits, social mores and attitudes, and collective beliefs must be understood to appreciate how particular messages, concepts and words are shaped, however, mutually shared values must be present for the message to be credible.

- **Cognitive Domain** – the interpretation of information varies depending upon the frame of reference used, from a logical and unemotional frame of reference to and overwhelmingly emotional one. For example, if a northern European audience received an overly emotional message, it would bestow little credibility to it as it may lack rationality and logical appeal.

As a developing concept, Strategic Communication is continuing to evolve and standardise across multiple platforms and

agencies, and as such, a number of elemental principles have emerged to solidify it throughout this developmental process, which will facilitate its cross-agency standardisation if implemented as an indispensable concept within a possible revolution in military affairs in Pakistan. These principles largely explain the core requisites of any message and how it should be communicated as well as how the overarching concept should preferably function to be effective.[x] Ideally, Strategic Communication incorporates a swift and dynamic on-going and *continuous* feedback cycle of research, scrutiny, preparation, implementation, appraisal, and development, which is self-evolving and adaptable to any fluid security environment. *Credibility* drives the whole communication process from beginning to end, and must consistently be displayed at every point from the constancy of the words that are obliged to match the actions being undertaken on the ground, the messengers and mediums that are used to disseminate the messages, and avoidance of any inconsistencies throughout the cross-agency synchronised Strategic Communication process in the delivery of information to the target audience.

A *dialogue* or a multi-directional communication process is mandatory, which requires a proactive approach by listening to and engaging the target audience, the exchange of information which enhances confidence, trust-building, and mutual understanding to form reciprocally respectful relationships. The Strategic Communication process must be decisively

driven with clear objectives and lines of communication from the **leadership**, which is integrated throughout the inter-agency structure. Awareness that communication is an all **pervasive** process must be present, and that every aspect of it sends a message to the intended and unintended audience, which can in turn interact to contradict or invalidate the message.

As messages are tailor-made for the intended audience, the delivery mechanism, media, and correct timing are essential so as not to miss the window of opportunity in a rapidly changing environment. Therefore, the communication process must be flexible enough to be **responsive** to real-time changes in circumstances amongst the audience and of events surrounding them without losing its long-term objectives. It is a fundamental requisite that the process be based upon achieving measurable **results** by directing every involved agency to pool resources to mutually secure common goals imbued within the process. There must be a profound **understanding** and command of the cultural and historical underpinnings of the moral beliefs and social mores that are all-encompassing within a particular audience in order to determine how a certain message may be composed, in conjunction with a deep awareness as to how it will be received and interpreted. A **unified effort**, in other words, a multi-disciplinary, multi-party and multi-agency approach is the essence of Strategic Communication. However, coordination must be fully integrated and synchronised both vertically, from tactical through to the strategic level,

and horizontally networked throughout the disparate agencies and departments involved in the Strategic Communications process.

For Strategic Communication to be effective information must be composed so as to be represented in a clear, concise, comprehensive and credible message, with no leeway for ambiguity so as to reduce, or ideally, leave no avenue for misinterpretation through mixed messages. The context within which the message is directed must be clearly understood, in conjunction with ground realities. If the government announces that it will ensure that any military operation is being conducted to provide security for the local residents and to re-establish and enhance the local governance apparatus, then this must be done to maintain credibility and support for future operations. In other words, "*sticking to your word*" to the fullest extent is a core tenet of Strategic Communication and must be continuously maintained to ensure the integrity, veracity and credibility of the government. In this respect, coordination of actions on the ground must be synchronised with the message that is being delivered.

Of utmost importance is the ability to recognise that not every audience may interpret a message the way you would want it to be interpreted. There are always going to be elements within an audience that will misinterpret a message, since some "*audiences have emotions more complex than the electrical circuitry in modern munitions*".[xi] To alleviate such

circumstances, it is essential to learn, comprehend and understand the disparate cultural, religious, historical, linguistic philological and ethnic characteristics of a target audience. Only then may we be able to appreciate how a particular message will be interpreted. The expertise of anthropologists, linguists, historians, philosophers, religious scholars, and political leaders from the target audience must be availed to compose a strategically focused, yet tactically synchronised message. The importance of this step cannot be underestimated, since misunderstanding the audience can literally ruin any Strategic Communication effort. Once the contents of a message have been 'agreed to' there is no avenue for '*solo arias*' amongst any agency or department within the establishment, rather, it must stick to the message with both words and actions.

The target audience may also be too vast for a generalised message to have any influence. What is often overlooked is that there may be substantial numbers of sub-cultures within a particular community that is the focus of the Strategic Communications program. A clear delineation of the audience is therefore necessary. For example, every community is composed of a vast variety of people who may hold divergent sets of core beliefs and values depending upon the particular paradigm that they may have had nurtured and inculcated within their psyche from their local environment, or willingly chosen through an enhanced thought process involving a paradigm transformation and shift. A thorough analysis of the audience therefore requires the delineation of sub-audiences and any message that intends to influence the audience may therefore be required to be specifically composed to attend to any divergent views, beliefs or values within the sub-audiences in relation to the achievement of required objectives and goals.

There may be various levels of delineation amongst the audience, which may contain numerous sub-groups; however, it may suffice to include the initial order of delineation within the scope of this paper, which, according to the Canadian Forces Doctrine, is composed of four categories[xii]:

- **Ultimate**: the actual and intended audience of the message.

- **Intermediate**: not necessarily a constituent of the actual target audience, but may have significant authority over it.

- **Apparent**: one that may appear to be, but is not the actual target audience.

- **Unintended**: an audience that received the message that was intended for the target audience. This may also include the adversary, and care must be taken to understand where the boundaries lie in this respect.

Maximisation of resources is one primary concern in the delineation of audiences; however, the maintenance of the selected aim of the Strategic Communications program is the most important concern, and may require extensive time and resources to

secure an effective delivery of the message for the relevant target audience(s). While constructing a tailor-made message, three specific characteristics of the target audience should be considered[xiii], the conditions within which the audience has no control over, such as the climate or location; the receptivity of the audience in the way it receives information; and, the potential or actual vulnerabilities of the audience, which can or should be exploited. By delineating or exploiting the characteristics of the audience, inconsistencies, ambiguities and mixed messages can be avoided. Furthermore, tailoring the message increases the possibility of influencing the specific set of perceptions that are being targeted by being '*personal, persuasive, and permanent*'[xiv].
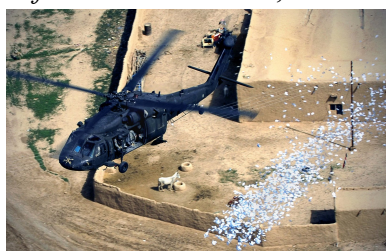
The delivery mechanism for the message has an overriding importance when we consider the delineation of the target audience. There is no limit to the availability of mediums of information dissemination that can be used from radio, print media, television (terrestrial, cable and satellite), electronic media (internet, e-mail, and streaming video), to CDs, DVDs, Blue-Ray, video games (PS3, Nintendo Wii, and Xbox), and the extraordinarily technologically successful mobile phones; however, a strategic approach requires that the mediums used are also tailored to the message being sent and the target audience that it is intended for. It makes no sense to broadcast television programs to an area in which television sets are few and far between. The message will not be received. Nor is it feasible to spend vast sums on the written word when few constituents of the targeted audience are literate. In this respect, the maxim, '*a picture is worth a thousand words*' holds true. The mass dissemination of images to all mediums capable of carrying imagery can change the course of a conflict. Such images can be produced to have a cognitive effect, utilising subliminal messaging techniques by juxtaposing layered information within the image.

Time is inherently built into the evolving concept of Strategic Communication. Whether seeking a long-term strategy or short-term solution, the timing of any strategic communication is essential. In this rapidly changing information environment, the swift release of a message may be the key to reinforcing actions on the ground. The phrase, '*being the firstest, with the mostest*' has real significance in this respect. This may be explained by the '*sleeper effect*', that is, where the association between the source of information and the message in a person's memory fades or dissolves over time, upon recalling the message the source is not easily associated (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).[xv] Being the first to release information is often the key to a successful operation. This is also true for an adversary, which vies to degrade our Strategic Communication efforts. Once a piece of information (a message) is out in the infosphere, it becomes very difficult to retract it from the cognitive processes of the audience if it has become entrenched, which is the objective of out adversaries. Whether it is true or false, or however inaccurate it is,

it will not be given parity in the audience's attention if it is placed second. "*Those who speak the fastest, or first, are often perceived as purveyors of truth, especially if the so called 'truth' fits preconceived notions created by centuries of historical precedent*"[xvi].

In certain circumstances it may be better to pre-empt an adversary's dissemination of information, as an audience's receptivity is reduced if placed second. Pre-emptive information dissemination also acts to counter adversarial disinformation in a fast changing situation on the ground. As in one of the basic principles of war, '*massing*' of information may better suit the process of information pre-emption, where consistently targeting multiple audiences through a massive number of diverse mediums, and simultaneously through all relevant agencies and departments in a synchronised effort, brings the message home in the form of '*information strikes*', as long as they are based on sound facts that are not inconsistent with the realities of a particular incident, situation or mission on the ground. For example, although the United States did try to pre-empt the second Gulf War (2003) with a massive information and psychological warfare campaign, the message was inconsistent with the facts on the ground. From the onset, there was a towering opposition to the operation, which was proven true within weeks of the invasion. As the adage goes, '*you can fool some people all of the time, and you can fool all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time*'. Again, the credibility of the message is paramount.

In conclusion, this paper proposes the amalgamation of all information producing agencies under the umbrella of an overarching structure under the premise of Strategic Communications. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the complexities of the formation of such an organisation, it may be pertinent to discuss this matter in a future paper. Nevertheless, the Strategic Communications '*Division or Directorate*' does not infer the formal merger of the disparate agencies but the proactive synchronised and coordinated production of information so as to invalidate mixed messages, misunderstanding and misinterpretation, and to produce concise, coherent, credible and cogent information that supports the government's policy objectives and goals. There is a long way to go. However, with determination, collaboration and compromise amongst the disparate agencies, and in measured and tangible steps in the right direction in harmony with the premise of Strategic Communication, there is no reason why such a revolution in military and civil affairs cannot be undertaken.

Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International

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Pakistani flag:

http://theislamicnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/pakistan-flag_97.jpg

US troops in Afghanistan image:

http://sydwalker.info/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/troops_in_afghan_war.gif

Chess board image:

http://www.fiebich.org/communities/7/004/006/384/257/images/4521145374.jpg

Mike Mullen image:

http://www.topnews.in/files/Michael-Mullen.jpg

Helicopter from the US 10th Mountain Division conducting a 'psyops' leaflet drop:

http://lh4.ggpht.com/-B0reoVLiJrA/SlOxWJ-AYFI/AAAAAAAADZ4/7WqPnmh26DQ/1211195634053.jpg

(Accessed: 28/06/2011)

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