Are words enough in a crisis?

Can military forces get their messages across more effectively? RAND Europe examines NATO’s new Strategic Communications concept.

BACKGROUND

Modern technologies have transformed communications. Anyone can access mobile networks or post material to the internet, even in remote locations. This information revolution makes it hard for governments to control the messages reaching key audiences, particularly in fast-changing situations. This is particularly true for military coalitions. The more partners there are, the harder it is to agree messages quickly. NATO’s adversaries also have the advantages of local knowledge and less formal, flexible structures.

RESEARCH APPROACH

In 2009, NATO developed a Strategic Communications concept that aims to improve speed and coordination across all functions so audiences receive coherent, fair and timely information about NATO actions.

The French Joint Forces Centre for Concept Development, Doctrine and Experimentation (CICDE) asked RAND Europe to help clarify the concept and assess its relevance for France. We carried out a literature review and interviews at NATO, in the US and in France. The work forms part of the CICDE’s broader consideration of military influence strategies.

CLARIFYING THE CONCEPT

We probed NATO’s definition to clarify the concept of Strategic Communications. In essence, all messages should be:

- Coherent: based on coordination between and within different functions
- Current: as a result of timely decisions
- Credible: because they are factually accurate
- Clear: so that multiple audiences understand them

NETWORK STRUCTURES TO ENHANCE COORDINATION

Traditional military structures provide clear leadership but can struggle to communicate swiftly in changing environments. In contrast, a flexible network structure provides greater coherence and speed, but leadership may be less clear. Strategic Communications requires a balance between hierarchy and coordination.

THE FIREWALL CHALLENGE: COORDINATION VERSUS SEPARATION

Coherent messages rely on coordination between the operational and public affairs functions, which can lead to a potential conflict of purpose. The two must work together, but also need a “firewall” between them to prevent operationally sensitive information being released more widely through the public affairs function. NATO has experimented with different models in Afghanistan and continues to experience challenges in finding a workable structure.

IMPACT

Informing decision making in France. The project team suggested that the Strategic Communications concept would complement existing French government communication strategy in crisis situations. The implications for structures and resources were discussed at a conference at the Military School in Paris and are now under consideration.

New insights for other member states. Other NATO states are using the work to improve their understanding of Strategic Communications and the possible implementation challenges.
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