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NATO's Strategic Communications concept and its relevance for France

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Prepared for the Joint Forces Centre for Concept Development, Doctrine and Experimentation, France (Centre interarmées de concepts, de doctrines et d'expérimentations, Etat-major des Armées, France)

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Executive summary

Research context and scope

This research was commissioned by the Joint Forces Centre for Concept Development, Doctrine and Experimentation (*Centre interarmées de concepts de doctrines et d'expérimentations, CICDE*) following the adoption of the Strategic Communications concept by NATO in September 2009. This concept, which is still being developed, responds to the difficulties experienced by the Western forces in gaining the support of the Afghan population. The aim of Strategic Communications is to make political-military communications more strategic and capable of influencing target audiences' way of thinking and behaving, by facilitating the rapidity and coherence of the communications.

The objective of the research is to provide the necessary elements for the CICDE to decide whether to integrate an equivalent concept into the French doctrinal body, in an effort to maintain coherence of its doctrinal body with NATO's.

Research methodology

The research followed two phases; the first aimed to clarify the objectives, direction, structure and resources of the Strategic Communications concept. This phase consisted of a comprehensive literature review; the majority of the literature that was reviewed came from NATO and the United States, given that they were the only ones to have adopted the Strategic Communications concept at the time the research was conducted.[2] Key informant semi-structured interviews carried out at NATO and in the United States

[2] The United States' concept is known as Strategic Communication (note the singular form, in contrast with the plural form of NATO's concept).

allowed us to contextualise the literature and complete the first phase. In each interview, the research team probed on the following areas:

- the context in which the concept has been developed,
- its objective, range and the way it is implemented,
- the resources made available,
- the difficulties and opportunities that arise.

The second phase of the research aimed to examine the relevance of NATO's concept for France. Key informant semi-structured interviews were carried out in France to enrich the research team's reflections on the matter. As Strategic Communications did not exist in France, each interview started by identifying the extent to which the person interviewed understood NATO's concept and its relationship to the influence domain. The research team then enquired about the process of political-military communication in France: its structure, resources, audiences, coherence, rapidity and effectiveness.

The names and positions of the persons whom the research team interviewed are available in the "Acknowledgments" section at the start of this document.

Research conclusions

NATO defines its Strategic Communications concept as follows:

> The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (lnfo Ops), and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims. (PO(2009)0141, 2009)

In order to clarify the concept's objectives, its scope and execution, the research team produced its own definition of it:

> Strategic Communications is a process designed to coordinate communications (words and deeds) between inter-ministerial actors and to reinforce their strategic effect. To achieve this, Strategic Communications exploits all existing expertise, to be found in the various information and communication depart-

ments. The aim of Strategic Communications is to promote behaviour in target audiences that is favourable to the actors' objectives and, thereby, to shape the operational environment.

This concept seems relevant to France, a country where strategic changes since the end of the 20th c. have had an impact on the efficiency of communications , like in other Western states. The revolution in information technologies and the multinational nature of the current military deployments mean that military communications have to be particularly coherent and rapid in order to have an effect on targets. Key informants have underlined the fact that, in this new environment, the strategic range of the French political-military communications sometimes needs to be reinforced. They explain that this would allow the government to further shape the operational environment rather than be defensive, as in past crises, with knee-jerk reactions to situations as they arise.[3]

This concept is however only relevant in France in crisis situations.[4] The Elysée already conducts strategic communications, instructing Ministers on the messages they must convey. The interviewees nonetheless argued that this effort would benefit from being subjected to a more concerted effort in situations of crisis. The Elysée would continue to direct communications in these times as it benefits from a unique inter-ministerial authority which can facilitate rapid and coherent communication, as required by Strategic Communications.

If France developed an equivalent concept to that currently in place in NATO, it would be vital to reflect on its terminology as the term Strategic Communications is confusing in the French context. On the one hand, it alludes to media capabilities rather than all oral, written and behavioural communication instruments and, on the other hand, it positions the concept at a strategic level despite also being relevant at the operational and tactical levels.

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3 This notion refers to the American military concept of "shaping", i.e. influencing one's environment (see definition in the glossary).

4 The notion of crisis refers in this report to political-military situations which require governments to react quickly and effectively, such as instability in a neighbouring country, or riots requiring military as well as police action.

The structure facilitating Strategic Communications would also need to be studied. The aim of the concept is to coordinate the communication of inter-ministerial actors and reinforce their strategic effect, including through making it more coherent and rapid. A flexible network structure can promote this type of communication. The way the French institutions are structured is nevertheless hierarchical and bureaucratic, thereby allowing for clear leadership which is also key to Strategic Communications. It would be beneficial to find a balance between the current hierarchical and bureaucratic structure and a network structure that is relatively flexible.

If a concept that was equivalent to that of NATO's Strategic Communications were to be put in place in France, the possibility of creating a working group would be worth exploring. Such a group would help institutionalise the concept, and once established within the institutions, ensure its continued relevance and effective implementation. In France, this group could be directed by the National Defence and Security Committee (*Conseil de défense et de sécurité nationale*) and could involve relevant experts. Initially, the group could focus on the following questions, which have yet to be answered:

- Which terminology would be used to describe this concept in France?
- How could one achieve a better balance between the hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of the institutions and a flexible network structure?
- What processes and principles could be developed to ensure that Strategic Communications experts would be available during crises, and that their expertise and know-how could be exploited?
- What role could the private sector play in implementing Strategic Communications, given its expertise in the subject?
- How would Strategic Communications training be configured?