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General John R Allen  
Strategic Communication as ISAF's Primary Maneuver Force

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Thank you for that kind introduction. It's a privilege and an honor to be here this afternoon. I am particularly pleased to speak to this audience about Strategic Communications and to meet with professionals from so many of our alliance nations, who for so many years to come will rely on strategic communication. Today, I'd like to speak with you about Strategic Communications in the context of ISAF and the Campaign in Afghanistan.

Before I begin, I'd like to formally thank SHAPE's Chief of Strategic Communications, Mark Laity, and his team for bringing this conference together and this august group of speakers at this terrific event, and in particular, Dr. Steve Corman, a real expert in the field of narrative. Thank you for traveling such a long way.

And thank you all for being here to advance the evolution of NATO Strategic Communications in support of operations and missions.

Let me tell you why I thought it was important enough to leave the combat zone to speak with you today. This is a critical moment in the campaign. This is a vital moment for NATO to succeed. Our strategic communication must reach multiple audiences — audiences in Afghanistan, throughout the region, and in capitals in our alliance and around the world.

Your work is of great importance to our success in Afghanistan. It's an area that affects the campaign on a daily basis. As I say at ISAF Headquarters, I view Strategic Communication as my most responsive maneuver element. Information must be

treated in the same vein as a component of combined arms, indeed as a weapon. To think of it otherwise sells short the capability and the potential impact. It requires aggressiveness, speed, and agility to put information in the hands of the people and to effectively counteract, in our case in Afghanistan, the virulent and nearly pervasive and demoralizing propaganda of the enemy.

Informing audiences with accuracy, precision, and speed is an important part of our campaign and our mission in Afghanistan. As we move forward, as our numbers diminish, Strategic Communication and other non-kinetic fires are going to take on an even greater role.

We are entering a Strategic Moment in our campaign, and the Afghan people are living in a pivotal year of their history. Going into the Chicago NATO Summit last month, many were looking toward a 2014 horizon when the UN mandate for ISAF ends and the Afghan National Security Forces will be fully in the lead for security. The Summit in Chicago adjusted all of our sights from 2014 out to 2024. At that Summit, fifty nations sent three unmistakable messages to the world:

- To the Afghan people: we are committed to your future,
- To the Region: the International Community will not abandon Afghanistan as we did in the post-Soviet era; and
- To the Taliban: you cannot wait us out.

That message combined with the growing capability of the Afghan National Security Forces is sending a powerful signal to the insurgency. Throughout history, insurgencies have seldom been defeated by foreign forces. Indeed, they have been beaten ultimately by indigenous national forces. In the long run, in this campaign, our goals will

not only be achieved but will also be secured by Afghan forces. So transition, then, in the concept of Lisbon Transition, is the linchpin of our strategy, not merely the “way out.”

As the ANSF take the lead in more and more areas, we have eroded a fundamental aspect of the enemy’s narrative – the enemy’s strategic narrative – they are no longer fighting foreign forces. They are fighting fellow Afghans, increasingly capable and credible Afghan forces, and that is a very powerful strategic leverage for us to employ.

As a result of these factors, we are seeing a sea change in the insurgency. We are hearing a sense of despondency among the insurgents

- as they understand the international community will stand with the people of Afghanistan in the long term, which means for them another decade of war.
- as they face increasingly capable Afghan National Security Forces, and
- as they see that the Afghan people are rejecting the violence and intimidation of the insurgents.

Let me tell you this point is becoming very interesting, as we’re hearing increasing numbers of Afghans rising up against the brutality of the Taliban. I met with a leader just last night who has asked for help to throw off the yoke of the Taliban.

But none of us harbor illusions. We know that we face long-term challenges as well. We know the Taliban remain a resilient and determined enemy, and that many of them will try to regain lost ground this summer, through assassination, intimidation, high-profile attacks, and the emplacement of IEDs. Just last night, the casualties continued



to roll in. Afghanistan will continue to face domestic challenges and challenges from the region.

Throughout these opportunities and in the face of these challenges, strategic communications will be increasingly — indeed vitally — important. One of my four campaign priorities has been to remain innovative, agile, flexible and responsive. This attitude is particularly important for Strategic Communicators and to commanders.

In the aggregate, our tactical actions will enable us to prevail; however, a single incident — what I call a meteor strike — can significantly erode, or even imperil the success that so many have sacrificed to achieve. The enemy will seek to exploit every error and every piece of misinformation available.

Each perceived injustice and instance of disrespect toward the Afghan people puts another arrow in the quiver of the enemy. He will use every incident he can to chip away at our moral credibility in the eyes of the Afghan people and even in the eyes of our own nations. He will wield disinformation to separate the people from their government and to attack the very cohesion of this great Coalition.

This campaign is as much about a battle of the narrative as it is about defeating the enemy on the battlefield. To me the applicable elements of strategic communication come down four principles of immediacy, proximity, voice, and composition.

When I speak about immediacy, what I mean is that we've got to get out there fast — with something — but always the truth. We are engaged in a competition, a competition of speed of information. We know in battle speed of thought and speed of action are often decisive. It is so in competing narratives. Thus, we must be first with the truth; first in action to follow-up; and unrelenting in accurate communication with the

Afghan people, to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, to the media, and our chain of command. Sometimes, the only answer we have is “I don’t know yet,” but initial lack of information does not mean we cede the information battle space to the enemy.

Immediacy must be complemented by proximity. The message must emanate from where it is most impactful, where it would be most meaningful.

The next is “voice.” Central to the credibility of the message is who’s deploying the message. In the strategy of maneuvering information, the “who” is just as important as the when and where. They must be considered a system and inextricably linked. The most important narrative will fall well short of the target if the message is late, emanates from the wrong place, and the voice deploying that message isn’t someone with credibility for that issue or possessing the gravitas to make the case.

This leads us to the final of the four principles: composition. The content of each message must be formulated, carefully crafted, for each audience. Time must be spent on each of the audiences – how they are related and how they are interested.

There are often competing audiences, with competing interests. For every stakeholder – whether an Afghan farmer or a head of state — and each was in play in this case — the message requires its own blend of immediacy, proximity, voice, and composition, but they must be related.

Strategic Communication, thus, is about more than the individual messages and their immediate impact – it is also about the long-term Strategic Conversation to which they contribute. When I took command one year ago, the process of Transition had just begun – Transition in the context of Lisbon Transition. The Strategic Conversation was

about building the necessary capabilities for the ANSF to assume security responsibility for the first Tranche of Transition or 25 percent of the population and working towards subsequent four Tranches, each phase of transition. The goal of full transition by the end of 2014 was a distant mark on the horizon when we began to build this narrative.

Today the conversation has changed to focus on enabling governance and long-term partnerships – shifting to a “normal” security cooperation relationship with a sovereign Afghanistan that is secured by Afghan forces and continuing to strengthen the institutions of governance. The dialogue now is about a Decade of Transformation. We now look toward a not so distant horizon of 2024, when a stable Afghan partner contributes to the stability and the prosperity of the region. This is a powerful message with multiple components, all of which bear in some manner, each upon another.

Strategic Communication must be integrated with every effort of our campaign in Afghanistan from strategic right down to the tactical and wherever else we’ll find ourselves in the future for strategic communication in peace, crisis, or war. This is why I have my Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Communication, Brigadier General Steph Twitty, constantly by my side. By the way, he’ll be fielding all the questions today. I have such confidence in him.

Strategic Communication includes activities and messages of immediate impact, but it also links those messages together to contribute to and form a coherent whole, that greater operational and strategic conversation. Whether it is a small shura of tribal elders, an international press conference, or a rapid Tweet, it is all a part of the strategic conversation. To that end, we need to employ all of the appropriate munitions and



weapons systems in our strategic communications arsenal to achieve the desired “combined arms” effects.

So my challenge to you is to be the ultimate team — collaborating across our many disciplines and military cultures to create opportunities to inform audiences in a time, place, setting, and manner of our choosing. We should set the tempo. We should set the speed. We should set the control. If we do this, our coordinated, coherent message will achieve our objectives. If we don’t, we truly risk information fratricide. In Afghanistan that equals lives, and it could even equal the campaign.

I’m in my twelfth month of command. I cannot tell you how many times, as opportunity presented itself, or as crisis emerged – and Steph remembers late nights — when I asked the question to my staff: “Who will own the narrative?” If we think of strategic communications as a maneuver arm in the context of combined arms, where our actions are guided and informed by immediacy, proximity, voice and composition, we will own the narrative. We will own the narrative that gives Afghans hope. We will own the narrative that reassures the region of long term stability. We will own the narrative that reinforces the cohesion of this remarkable NATO-led coalition, and we will own the narrative that denies this malignant enemy any advantage today and in the future.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of addressing you this afternoon. And, thank all of you for your efforts in informing various key audiences of the campaign, our vision, and what ISAF and our Afghan partners are doing. With this our goal, with confidence in our campaign, supported by coherent strategic communication, we will prevail. Thank you very much.